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Critics' THEATRE REVIEWS

1942

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†"The First Crocus" opened Friday, January 2nd, at the Longacre Theatre.
†"Papa Is All" opened Tuesday, January 6th, at the Guild Theatre.
†"Johnny on a Spot" opened Thursday, January 8th, at the Plymouth Theatre.
†"The Lady Comes Across" opened Friday, January 9th, at the 44th Street Theatre.
†"The Rivals" opened Wednesday, January 14th, at the Shubert Theatre.

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NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN

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"The Rivals"

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, *January 15, 1942*

Bobby Clark Makes Revival of The Rivals Worthwhile

By JOHN MASON BROWN

WARREN'S famous comment on the great Joseph Jefferson's totally untraditional performance of Bob Acres in The Rivals was "Sheridan 20 miles away." Just what he would have said had he seen Bobby Clark at the Shubert last night capering as only Bob Clark can caper, is as unguessable as it is irrelevant. For Mr. Clark pushed Sheridan as far away as once upon a time in a Players Club revival of Love for Love he had pushed Congreve. And once again, though another classic bit the tankark, all of us were delighted.

Mr. Clark is one of the drollest fellows on the stage. He belongs to the blood royal of true comics. When he cuts loose and rolls his blue eyes, shrugs a shoulder, indulges in a canine scrape, rattles his throat with gurgling noises, drapes himself across a chair or sends a darting hand out like a fish for a comic salutation, no script—however venerable and venerated—can hope to keep up with him.

If his Bob Acres is more Clark than Sheridan, what of it? Especially during the first half of the evening, when its tricks are fresher, his characterization is a zany's masterpiece. It is so convulsingly insane that some of us, forced as we were to decide between masters, willingly gave Mr. Clark our choice. In fact, because of his gloriously gay and giddy person we counted ourselves fortunate to have seen this revival of The Rivals. We would gladly go to see him again, which is something we cannot say of the evening as a whole.

• • •

When he spoofs the grand manner, Mr. Clark at least makes no pretense of having any connection with the 18th century. He is a brilliantly funny fellow, stalking in his own way (and finding) laughs unintended and unsuspected in a classic low-comedy part. From his first hilarious entrance his performance proudly announces the fact that Sheridan is more than 20 miles away. Thereafter Mr. Clark makes you glad that this is the case whenever he appears.

Not so the evening as a whole. With the exception of Philip Bourneuf's Sir Lucius O'Trigger, which has genuine style, and Donald Burr's Capt. Absolute, which is passable enough, the rest of the production is a pretty disappointing affair. Like Mr. Clark it cannot approximate the traditional graces, and, unlike him, it does not succeed in creating an acceptable acting style of its own.

Eva Le Gallienne's direction is in large part responsible for this. Miss Le Gallienne seems unable to make up her mind whether she is going in for a straight or a spoof revival. She mistakes coyness for elegance, caricature for character, farce for comedy, high school gymnastics for period manners and does not even bother to have her winsome victims on stage any more surprised by a plot that depends upon confused identity than are the spectators out front.

Although Watson Barratt has provided some very pleasant costumes and settings, and Macklin Marrow has supplied a charming score, the constant use of entr'-acte songs proves a decided bore. Arthur Guiterman's rhymed prologue is witty and graceful, but the cover-scene verses, which are mainly his, soon prove monotonous as devices. This is, of course, if one excepts, as one must except, Mr. Clark's hilarious repetition of Congreve's "Buxom Joan," which Mr. Marrow has scored excellently.

• • •

Offhand, one might think Mary Boland would be an admirable Mrs. Malaprop. Yet, though one laughs at her because of the sheer genius of some of Sheridan's word bungling, Miss Boland is strangely unsatisfactory. Her Mrs. Malaprop has none of that driving insistency which Mrs. Fiske brought to the part. Miss Boland is merely foolish of tongue, which is not enough. No one can tell what is her class, or what are her pretensions. She remains a comic strip figure, sketched but uncolored.

It is Walter Hampden who must speak the line about the frog suffering from quinsy. Considering the gruff gutteral tones he emits as Sir Anthony, this line takes on an almost autobiographical ring. A more resolutely unhumorous performance would be hard to imagine. The Lydia Languish of Haila Stoddard, though pretty, is hopelessly burlesqued. So is the Faulkland (always a dull part) of Robert Wallsten.

Indeed, the old comedy fares badly, due both to its age and the present production. The evening is no feather in Sheridan's cap nor the Guild's. But Mr. Clark emerges sporting so large a plume that for his sake alone, believe it or not, this current attempt at revivifying The Rivals is recommended.

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THEATRE REVIEWS

"The Rivals"

NEW YORK TIMES, *January 15, 1942*

THE PLAY IN REVIEW

"The Rivals"

By BROOKS ATKINSON

IF SHERIDAN had been lucky enough to cast Bobby Clark as Bobby Acres 167 years ago, "The Rivals" would not have failed on the first night. For Bobby is not only the funniest clown in the world but also a comedian of taste and invention. Although the Theatre Guild revival of the Sheridan war horse, which pawed the stage of the Shubert last evening, is a vivacious event, with Mary Boland and Walter Hampden also in high fettle, Mr. Clark transforms one scene in particular into a comic masterpiece.

It is the scene in which Sir Lucius O'Trigger is urging Bob Acres to fight a duel with the mythical ensign and in which Bob is whipping up his lagging valor with foolish celerity. A comedian in the grand manner, Mr. Clark takes the whole thing at a hop, skip and jump. He struts, whistles, poses and runs. He plunges into the scene with enormous gusto. Any one of several other buffoons might impose as funny a scene on the ancient script as Mr. Clark does. But it is hard to think of any one whose boyish revelry would also capture the spirit of the part as Sheridan wrote it. For all his fabulous skylarking, Mr. Clark somehow belongs.

* * *

Nothing else in Eva Le Gallienne's high-spirited revival measures up to this one scene of groaning merriment. But it is a production of which she and the Guild may be proud. Regard it not so much as a comedy of manners as a brawl of manners, for the accent is on humor. And Miss Boland's whirling Mrs. Malaprop with a clacking voice is also enormously funny. Dressed in a billowing costume, with a bobbing headdress, she flounces through her demented dictionary of bungled English with a wit that is furious and spontaneous. Mr. Hampden is no comedian at heart. But he is an intelligent actor, with a full knowledge of what he is playing. Especially in one choleric scene with the young captain, his Sir Anthony Absolute is energetc and amusing, and his presence gives the whole performance a useful foundation.

* * *

Mind you, not all of "The Rivals" can be played as broadly as Miss Le Gallienne has directed it here. Mr. Clark's scene of challenge is the climax of the performance. After that, the mood of "arch irreverence," as the Guild calls it, gets occasionally transparent when Sheridan is trying to write mannered comedy of love. And it must be confessed that Helen Ford, as the mischievous maid, acts as though she had swallowed an entire shipment of canaries. Miss Ford has such a pretty way with a Guiterman and Marrow song that she cannot forbear enjoying it herself.

But Halla Stoddard provides a lovely Lydia. As Julia, Frances Reid is demure and attractive. Donald Burr's Captain Absolute and Robert Wallsten's Faulkland are both well played. Philip Bourneuf, who was giving the town a notable Jaques last Autumn, is playing Sir Lucius O'Trigger with remarkable skill and understanding—strictly in the interests of the performance as a whole.

As scene-designer, Watson Barratt has furnished the production with some useful scenery in a light comedy mood and some gaily caparisoned costumes. To tell the truth, none of Macklin Marrow's occasional songs can compare with the "Buxom Joan" he wrote for The Players' revival of "Love For Love" in 1940. But that may seem to be so only because Mr. Clark sang it then and is repeating it here. Anything Mr. Clark puts his hand to becomes inspired fooling.

'THE RIVALS'

Richard Brinsley Sheridan's comedy arranged in two acts and nine scenes; directed by Eva Le Gallienne; settings and costumes by Watson Barratt; music by Macklin Marrow; lyrics by Arthur Guiterman; presented at the Shubert Theater by the Theater Guild on January 14, 1942. The cast:

Lydia Languish	Halla Stoddard
Lucy	Helen Ford
Julia	Frances Reid
Mrs. Malaprop	Mary Boland
Sir Anthony Absolute	Walter Hampden
Captain Absolute	Donald Burr
Fag	Raymond Johnson
Faulkland	Robert Wallsten
Acres	Bobby Clark
Boy	Walter Draper
Sir Lucius O'Trigger	Philip Bourneuf
David	Roland Hogue
Footman	George Boots
Footman	William Whitehead

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN, *January 15, 1942*

'The Rivals' Revived at Shubert Theatre

Bobby Clark's Portrayal of Bob Acres Stands Out in Guild Production

By JOHN ANDERSON

WITH a cast that brings Mary Boland and Walter Hampden back from Hollywood, and restores Bobby Clark to the stage, the Theatre Guild presented Sheridan's "The Rivals" at the Shubert Theatre last night within three days of the play's 167th anniversary. Since the comedy is admittedly one of the most brilliant in the language, and since Mr. Clark and Miss Boland are funmakers of rowdy magnificence the combination should be a sort of diamond sunburst, hilarious and dazzling. The simple and sad fact, however, is that the combination doesn't quite work.

Bobby Clark, of course, is a wonder and his exuberant sketch of Bob Acres is triumphant—by far the best thing about the revival. Mr. Clark's genius for antique comedy was discovered a couple of years ago in The Players' revival of "Love for Love" wherein Master Bobby laid the town in the aisles as he cavorted through the part of Ben, and sang, with irresistible effect, about the buxom Joan of Depthford.

The Guild has obligingly borrowed the song from Congreve and inserted it in "The Rivals," a smart idea, since it would probably improve any evening from "Sons o' Fun" to "Life with Father." And since we are all beneficiaries, not even Sheridan should complain.

Mr. Clark is equally uproarious in the challenge scene and he achieves such frantic postures while writing the letter that Sheridan's mockery of the fopperies of his time takes on the lusty power of modern clowning. Since the characters are largely farcical caricatures the performance never distorts, but only illuminates and emphasizes the play's best points.

Miss Boland's Role

Anyone might reasonably suppose that Miss Boland would have an equally vivid effect on the part of Mrs. Malaprop, a part associated in recent years with the comic genius of Mrs. Fiske. Yet Miss Boland, with all the driving energy of her best fooling, seems to miss the part almost completely and to be not Mrs. Malaprop so much as Mrs. Meshbesher, the never-to-be-forgotten lady of "Face the Music" whose jewels, you may remember, made her visible from Staten Island on a clear day.

Such comedy as this demands in every performance a sense of style and in the direction the effect, if not the detail, of mannered artifice. Only two or three of the present performances have this essential quality. Philip Bourneuf suggests it perfectly as Sir Lucius O'Trigger, and there are glimpses of it in Robert Wallsten's Faulkland.

Mr. Hampden works at it as Sir Anthony, to the point, in fact, of making it oppressive and the women generally are less successful. Helen Ford supplies a glinting mischief to the part of Lucy the maid, but her solo songs, between scenes, are not so fortunate. Indeed, the new songs seemed a serious modern intrusion, though Macklin Marrow's musical setting was charming and appropriate and might have been even better if left entirely to the orchestra.

Staged in 2 Acts

As edited for the present production and divided into two acts, instead of five, the play sags seriously after the intermission, instead of building towards the big duelling scene at the end.

The scene itself goes dull, like a long exploded joke, and the performances let it down badly, as if the players, anticipating all the farcical answers of the mix-up, let them go as a perfunctory conclusion. I have never seen the ending fall as flat as it does at the Shubert.

But Bobby Clark is wonderful to behold.

"The Rivals"

NEW YORK POST, *January 15, 1942*

Stunting by Bobby Clark Enlivens Guild's Version of "The Rivals"

By WILELLA WALDORF

EMBROIDERED with a rhymed prologue by Arthur Guiterman and a cluster of songs put together from eighteenth century odds and ends by Mr. Guiterman, Macklin Marrow and others, the Theatre Guild's long-awaited revival of Sheridan's "The Rivals," opened last night at the Shubert Theatre.

It is twelve years since "The Rivals" was last produced on Broadway—with Mrs. Fiske as the immortal Mrs. Malaprop—and the Guild, realizing that the elaborately artificial old comedy is apt to prove somewhat tiresome to modern audiences if presented with the stilted respect due a celebrated classic, has put on what it terms an irreverent version, with Mary Boland on hand to wreck the dictionary as Mrs. Malaprop, and rare stunting from time to time by Bobby Clark, who introduces some side-splitting burlesque antics into the role of the country squire, Bob Acres.

As if this weren't enough for one evening, Walter Hampden is also on hand to give Sir Anthony Absolute just the proper amount of over-acting to make him bearable. Mr. Hampden is particularly successful in emitting what for a better term may be referred to as zoo noises. That's the sort of production it is.

There are still stretches here and there when the old comedy wears pretty thin, and the coy subterfuges and the elegant languishing and the sly eye-rollings grow a little monotonous, but Eva Le Gallienne, who has directed with a good deal of skill, sees to it that this does not happen as often as it might. Songs are scattered casually through the evening for Mrs. Malaprop, Bob Acres, Captain Absolute, Sir Lucius O'Trigger and especially for Helen Ford as Lucy. It is Philip Bourneuf as O'Trigger who speaks the prologue informing the audience that the Guild for the nonce has "gone escapist."

An Excellent Cast

The stars are by no means the only members of the cast who give a good account of themselves. Haila Stoddard faints gracefully and pouts prettily as Lydia Languish; Donald Burr is handsomely dashing as the military man-about-town, Captain Absolute, and Robert Wallsten gives a cleverly diverting performance as the agonized Faulkland. Mr. Bourneuf's Sir Lucius O'Trigger is helpful on its own, and also as straight man for Bobby Clark, while Helen Ford is an arch little trick as the scheming Lucy. We could wish, however, that Miss Ford would make up her mind either to talk her songs or sing them, but not to do both.

It is mostly Miss Boland's and Mr. Clark's evening, with a good share also in the safe-keeping of Mr. Hampden. Mrs. Malaprop is a role, surely, that few actresses could fail to score in. Miss Boland goes at her language slaughtering with a fine gusto, and is just as funny at it as we had hoped she would be. To be sure, the Malaprop is a character that relies for its effect on one exaggerated gag that must last for an entire evening, but Miss Boland manages to give it a remarkable amount of variety and spirit.

Matching Mr. Hampden's zoo noises, Bobby Clark seethes with hot blood like an infuriated cat, emits shrill whistles, blows tunes out of a dueling pistol, dresses himself up in the elaborate habiliments of a beau of the period, and all but collapses at the prospect of fighting to uphold his honor. Every minute Bobby is on the stage there is something doing, and it all fits into the ensemble remarkably well. There will be few purists, surely, inclined to object to his goings-on as too giddy for 18th century comedy. While he was on the stage last night the house rocked with laughter.

Watson Barratt's scenery and costumes are charming and colorful, lending considerable distinction to the production, and Macklin Marrow has arranged some period tunes that fall pleasantly enough on the ear. Captain Absolute's song, in fact, struck us as so close to one of the hits of "The Beggar's Opera" that it might just as well have gone all the way to Gay.

Altogether this is a very merry, sometimes side-splitting, production of Sheridan's first and most famous play. Even people who feel that "The Rivals" ought to be left in the library at this late date will find themselves laughing immoderately at Bobby Clark.

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *January 15, 1942*

'The Rivals' Is Revived by the Theatre Guild for a Starry Cast

"The Rivals," comedy by Richard Brinsley Sheridan. Revived by the Theatre Guild at the Shubert Theatre, New York, Jan. 14, 1942.

★ ★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

WHEN the Theatre Guild first thought of reviving Sheridan's "The Rivals" it was, if I remember my press agents' reports, as a salute to the past and a friendly gesture toward the dramatic education of the young.

It was to be a feature of that series of popular-priced revivals staged by Eva Le Gallienne which was started with O'Neill's "Ah, Wilderness" and shortly is to be resumed with Capek's "R. U. R."

But "The Rivals," curiously, has a way of turning the heads of theatre folk. There are two or three upstanding parts in it that actors love to play and a healthy audience interest if the cast appeal is strong enough.

Once in rehearsal, with a trio of stars engaged for the leads—Mary Boland to play Mrs. Malaprop, Walter Hampden the Sir Anthony Absolute and Bobby Clark as the scampering Bob Acres—it was decided that here was too valuable a draw for a popular-priced revival.

Worthy Tradition

This "Rivals," they decided, was worthy the best traditions and entitled to top billing in any season. The first New York showing at the Shubert theatre last night did much to justify that judgment.

Certainly no other revival that any of you will remember has been as good, and none of them that I remember any better. Miss Boland is a blustering termagant as Malaprop. Bobby Clark is a commander of laughs, legitimate and illegitimate, as Acres. Hampden huffs and roars you a vigorous Sir Anthony.

But, what is of equal importanc to the evening as a whole, Helen Ford swings back gracefully to her soubrette days as Lucy, Haila Stoddard is a picture and a darling as Lydia, Donald Burr plays and sings a handsome and manly Jack Absolute and Philip Bourneuf speaks you an amusing prologue and acts you as blustering, and yet subdued, an Irishman as Sir Lucius. He shuts his teeth on the brogue, but that is not too important.

Your liking for "The Rivals" may be what it is, I, for example, have never found it too easy to take after the first hour. But your appreciation of these individual performances, and for an added score of incidental songs by Macklin Marrow, most of which Miss Ford sings charmingly, is pretty sure to be happy.

Bob, the Clown

The Clark person is, as usual, a show in himself. Yet he does not, save in the letter writing scene, which is badly stretched, take Acres too boldly out of character.

There is, as you might suppose, none of the whimsical charm or legitimate art of a Jefferson in the performance. But there is a lot of good burlesque fooling and a raft of laughs for the Bobby Clark league. Even Jefferson could never have sung "Buxom Joan" as Bobby does.

Similarly, Miss Boland tosses the haughty grande dame manner of a Mrs. John Drew into the discard and plays Mrs. Malaprop as a straight and forceful lady of twisted vocabulary and determined purpose.

They are all helped greatly by the sensitively colored settings and costumes designed by Watson Barratt. The costuming, I think, tops that of all the "Rivals" revivals of which there is a record.

They are also helped by the Arthur Guiterman lyrics and Macklin Marrow songs, as said. These relieve the tedium of scene changes, keep the tone of the performance admirably in key, and round out the evening effectively.

Last night's subscribers were well pleased. I have a feeling those to follow will endorse this verdict.

"The Rivals"

NEW YORK SUN, *January 15, 1942*

'The Rivals,' With Mary Boland and Bobby Clark, Opens at the Shubert

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

ARTIFICIAL comedy is apt to prove uphill work in these crisper days, but Bobby Clark is a man who can take any hill at a gallop. Cast him as Bob Acres in Sheridan's "The Rivals" and turn him loose, with bending knees, with a quill pen to flourish and a whip to crack, let him treat the old master with comic irreverance, and you have something. You have, if you give him the help the Theater Guild has given, a gay and happily impertinent redecoration of "The Rivals."

The guild put Mr. Clark on last evening at the Shubert, along with Mary Boland to play Mrs. Malaprop, Walter Hampden to gruff his way through Sir Anthony Absolute, Helen Ford to frolic as Lucy and Haila Stoddard to flutter beautifully as Lydia Languish. Miss Eva Le Gallienne has guided them through their capers with a deft hand; Watson Barratt has provided light-hearted backgrounds and pretty clothes and a number of catchy songs have been interpolated. Even those who commonly approach the older comedy with raised eyebrows will agree that this sort of Richard Brinsley Sheridan never hurt anybody.

I have only admiration for Miss Boland's tripping way with Mrs. Malaprop's classic staggers through the English language and only respect for Mr. Hampden's more conservative, and perhaps rather throaty, playing. But to make this department happy, it is enough to give it Mr. Clark. The guild provides a fine cross-section of Mr. Clark in the first of the two acts in which the comedy has been rearranged, and pleasant little dabs of him later.

Mr. Clark comes on cracking a long whip, making faces, starting back in his own brand of terror at the explosive utterances of Capt. Absolute and the highly sensitive Mr. Faulkland. He does little dances to prove this and that, and makes engaging sounds of which Mr. Sheridan never thought. He throws quill pens like darts, and suspends himself between chair and table to write his famous challenge to Ensign Beverly. He quakes with terror; he growls like a cat; he has his hair done up in curl papers. Later, his eager strides as he rehearses for a duel carry him, apparently, to Eighth avenue. He is as broad as he is funny, and nobody has told him "No!" This works out beautifully, since Mr. Clark is a comedian who should never be curbed, but allowed always to run wild and wherever the spirit moves him.

They have treated the play, and all its complications and ingenious subterfuges, with proper casualness, keeping only so much of it as makes for a gay evening. The direction is deft and ingenious; the artfully witty phrases turn on jewelled bearings; pert little songs contributed by Arthur Guiterman and Macklin Marrow form pleasant decorations. Almost always they have maintained the tart flavor which is so essential to artificial wit.

And over and above everything else, there is Mr. Clark, his comedy pungent in the midst of artifice, robust clowning, which gives modern substance to the literary wit of a more leisured day. When he is present, appreciative smiles turn brightly into laughter.

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, *January 15, 1942*

Messrs. Clark and Sheridan

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

SINCE he is obviously one of the greatest men in the world, Bobby Clark has little trouble being a more important figure in the Theater Guild's current production of "The Rivals" than its author, the late Richard Brinsley Sheridan. The chances are that Mr. Clark would have dominated the proceedings even if the eminent Irish dramatist had been given a proper opportunity, but, with the new presentation doing everything possible to keep the dramatist in a minor place, it is pretty simple for the eminent comic to be the one hero of the event. He wouldn't have had to try. As a matter of fact, he does try, and handsomely, and he is unquestionably the life saver of the evening. Hilarious is the word for him.

* * *

In no other way, however, is the production worthy of the classic comedy that the Guild is presenting. Granted that "The Rivals" no longer seems to us the masterpiece of merriment which tradition has made it, the Sheridan work still possesses admirable qualities which are not merely historical. Miss Le Gallienne, who has directed it, is obviously aware of them, but it can hardly be said that she brings them out with any success. The trouble is that she never seems to have known in what mood the work should be presented. Upon some occasions the production appears to be having some modern fun at its expense. Upon others it gives evidence of attempting to offer the play in formal classic style. Chiefly, though, it succeeds in being just coy.

* * *

Although Mr. Clark provides almost the only joy of the evening, there are effective enough portrayals by Philip Bourneuf as Sir Lucius O'Trigger and by Donald Burr as Captain Absolute. On the whole, though, the alternate coyness and grimly determined high spirits somehow suggest the serious-minded professor striving to cut a few capers at the college dinner. Feeling that they have not enlivened things enough by what they have done with the text, the Guild has added a number of songs, most of them provided for the occasion by Arthur Guiterman and Macklin Marrow. They are quite pleasant and Miss Helen Ford sings the majority of them agreeably, but it hardly strikes me that they are successful in taking one's mind from the fact that "The Rivals" is being offered in a tedious production.

* * *

Among the disappointments of the revival is Miss Mary Boland, who returns after a Hollywood exile to play Mrs. Malaprop, that celebrated founder of a famous school of comic dialogue. Miss Boland has been away from us a long time, too long for her own good, and she, who has given us so much happiness in the past, now plays with little suggestion of style or quality. Walter Hampden glowers his way effectively enough through the role of Sir Anthony Absolute, Miss Haila Stoddard is a properly lively Lydia Languish and the others suffice, but it is only Mr. Clark who brings vigor and laughter to the occasion. As always, he is a joy, a delight and a comfort, but when he is off the stage "The Rivals" becomes a venerable bore rather than a classic comedy.

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM", *January 15, 1942*

Acres and Acres of Bobby Clark

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

WHEN it comes to revivals, there's always *The Rivals*; and so, under the auspices of the Theatre Guild, Sheridan's first-born bobbed up again last night. By far the best news about the current production is that Bobby Clark is careening madly in it, ostensibly as Bob Acres, but actually as Bobby Clark. That is something to be thankful for, but no more, I'm afraid, than the production needs. For of what, after 167 years, remains gay and diverting about *The Rivals* itself, the Theatre Guild has captured no very great amount.

Certainly it has made decided, not to say strenuous, efforts. It has come up with a brand-new prologue by Arthur Guiterman. It has larded the play with songs. It has introduced a lot of new business. Indeed it has made use at one point or another of every style of comedy you can think of—except the right one. *The Rivals*, which was partly meant to spoof the lachrymose comedy of its day and partly to satirize on very broad lines certain familiar types, is not, like *The School for Scandal*, a polished comedy of manners. At times, indeed, it is close to farce. But all the same it never runs away with itself, or degenerates into beer-garden antics, or shrills into coy falsetto; it is laid in elegant 18th Century Bath, and it preserves something of the tone and manner of 18th Century Bath.

You would never have guessed this last night, however. The production, with its crude underlinings, seemed more like a burlesqued revival of some absurdity of 1875 than a recreated comedy of 1775. And when *The Rivals* tried to be 18th Century it confused coyness with style. There are better ways of conveying the flavor of the past than through ogles and skirt-liftings.

Perhaps it's just as well *The Rivals* wasn't played with style, for if it had been Bobby Clark would have outraged it. As it was, he saved the evening. He went at *The Rivals* as he went, a while back, at *Love for Love*—as though he had never heard of it. He was all over the place, skipping, dancing, clowning and being, most of the time, very funny. Now and then he mugged and hammed too much, but three cheers for him anyhow.

Mary Boland's Mrs. Malaprop was very disappointing; she misused a great deal more than words. Walter Hampden, as Sir Anthony Absolute, looked like Lord Chatham and went at things pretty heavily. The rest of the cast was at the mercy of the direction, though Donald Burr made a pleasantly forthright Captain Absolute.

"The Lady Comes Across"

NEW YORK SUN, *January 10, 1942*

'The Lady Comes Across,' Musical Comedy, Opens at the Forty-fourth Street

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

EVERY now and then you can reach into "The Lady Comes Across," which opened at the Forty-fourth Street last evening, and pull out a plum. The plum usually turns out to be Joe E. Lewis, who gets riper as he goes along and ends up with an ode to H. V. Kaltenborn that is the epitome of Mr. Lewis's peculiar charm. Mischa Auer, Evelyn Wyckoff and Ruth Weston are also fruity; there are some excellent dances, and Stewart Chaney has dressed the whole large musical with colorful, but discreet, opulence.

There is also considerable plot, and here the mind reels a little. Fred Thompson and Dawn Powell have invented a story about a young woman who dreams that she is approached by the FBI to do a bit of counter-espionage in a dress shop. Awake, she does do the bit of counter-espionage in a dress shop. She has to pretend to be a sinister lady from, I guess, Graustark. Mischa Auer, on the other hand, has to pretend to be a baroness from, apparently, "Charley's Aunt." In the end, the lady gets the papers, which are in a rather gaudy girdle which has to be taken off Miss Weston. Her young man, maddened by the complexity of it all, jumps out of a window.

This fairly eerie tale is scattered through the proceedings, here a scrap and there a scrap, as if the assembled authors were leading a paper chase. Those readily confused by musical comedy plots will find the going peculiarly tough and may be willing to settle at almost any time for more of Mr. Lewis and more of the dances which George Balanchine has directed with, every now and again, real imagination. There is a fine, strange ballet danced by a cat and some black figures with umbrellas, for example, which is much too good to be spoiled near the end by a lot of young people in scanties. And there are also some charming dances by a young pair named Gower and Jeanne.

Vernon Duke and John LaTouche, responsible for the music and lyrics, do, on the other hand, only moderately well. Mr. Duke's music seemed to me only business-like, average music and Mr. LaTouche's lyrics seldom seemed like much of anything. This is a little hard on people like Miss Wyckoff and Wynn Murray, who would really like to sing. Mr. Lewis, incidentally, gets his best songs from three other people named Danny Shapiro, Jerry Seelen and Lester Lee. This keeps the record straight. The Martins, the harmony foursome, make a couple of other songs sound fine.

On the whole, "The Lady Comes Across" gives the impression of having been tossed together by a good many people, working in seperate and probably sound-proof rooms, each ignorant of the activities of the others. The result of this method is a lack of the coherent style which is so useful in musicals. There are a good many plums in it, all the same, and if you don't like one particularly the next is sure to have a very different flavor. The management has thus found a way to please everybody a little, always a possibility of you don't insist on satisfying anybody entirely.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN, *January 10, 1942*

'Lady Comes Across' Opens at 44th St.

Joe E. Lewis and Mischa Auer Star in New Musical

By JOHN ANDERSON

AFTER out of town trials and in town tribulations, including the last minute loss of its leading lady, George Hale's musical production "The Lady Comes Across" arrived at the Forty-fourth Street Theatre last night and turned out to be surprisingly better than the storm warnings had indicated.

With all the bright talents involved it ought to be much smarter than the routine Broadway show that it is, but it has some pleasant tunes by Vernon Duke, some spectacular and amusing dancing, and not only Mischa Auer, but Joe E. Lewis. When Mr. Lewis sings tenderly about his sympathy for the cheated month of February, and his undying loyalty to H. V. Kaltenborn the show gets somewhere.

With the lavish use of a pair of scissors on the book and some drastic pruning of the ballets, or whatever you do to ballets to get them in reasonable limits, the whole thing could be improved and starched up. As it is it seems to have been taken off the assembly line too soon.

Dream Ballets

Oddly enough this somewhat unfinished appearance has nothing to do with the substitution of Evelyn Wyckoff for Jessie Matthews in the principal part. Miss Wyckoff took a difficult assignment and did admirably by it.

The trouble seems to be in dat ole debbil book, for the story is not only sketchy but badly ventilated, and doesn't make the best use of either its characters or material. Its tale of a girl who dreams herself into a great spy plot, and then proceeds to make the dream come true is all right, and certainly good enough spring-board into the surrealist dream ballets Mr. Balanchine has created.

But it is not humorously inventive, makes scant use of Mr. Auer's goofy comedy, and leaves Mr. Lewis to extricate himself in solo numbers which he does most effectively. It wastes Ruth Weston on a rather lame burlesque of a society party thrower, and reduces the work of the once ample Wynn Murray in line with her personal reduction

Pleasant Company

They have the words of John LaTouche to sing to Mr. Duke's music, they have Stewart Chaney's very beautiful costumes and scenery, the direction of Romney Brent, the supervision of Morrie Ryskind, wigs by Lerch, corsets by Kabo, and heaven knows what all. With that much going on I would have expected something rather exceptional, and "The Lady Comes Across" isn't exceptional.

Ronald Graham, whose performance in "Sunny River" was one of the redeeming features of that show, has less opportunity here as the FBI hero, but he makes the most of it in an excellent performance. Stiano Braggiotti takes care of the Fifth Column menace with suitable snarling. Our old friends from the Ballet Russe, Delarova, Roatova, and Marc Platt, formerly Platoff, perform amusingly, and Gower and Jeanne again make themselves welcome as a spirited dance team.

Altogether it is a pleasant and willing and handsome company, so here's where a good blue pencil might keep a show out of the red.

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM," *January 11, 1942*

'The Lady Comes Across,' But No One Cares—She's An Extremely Dull Gal

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

THERE'S an FBI man in *The Lady Comes Across*, but he has fallen asleep at the switch. For he has allowed those arch saboteurs of musical comedy, the book and the gags, to ruin what might have been a good show. There are some very attractive things in it, in the way of an engaging leading lady, pretty girls, dancing and Joe E. Lewis; and for awhile I found myself pleasantly beguiled. But in the end the fifth columnists decidedly carried the day.

The plot of *The Lady Comes Across* turned out to be, more than anything else, a plot against itself. It has to do with foreign spies and a girl whose clairvoyant dreams manage to trip them up or track them down or something. Also prominent is one of those hen-brained, man-hunting society dames who I thought had been written out of musical shows as long ago as the *Night Boat* era. Even worse, however, are the forced and feeble gags which achieve a kind of arithmetical miracle—the more they multiply of themselves (and they multiply like rabbits), the more they subtract from the show.

And *The Lady Comes Across* lacks the two things that might have overcome such drawbacks; a brilliant score and a big personality. Mr. Duke's music is pleasant but commonplace; and though Joe E. Lewis happily wanders in and out, offering such likeable numbers as *February* and *The H. V. Kaltenborn Blues* and supplying comedy that, if only by contrast, seems very enjoyable, he is no Wynn or Cantor who can hold a wobbly show together. Nor is Mischa Auer much of a help. His darting motions give me pleasure, but much less than the constant faces he makes gives me pain.

On the other side are Evelyn Wyckoff, an attractive young lady who took over the lead from Jessie Matthews at the eleventh hour, and does very nicely at it; some stunning-looking models; the gaily youthful (though not up to par) dance team of Gower and Jeanne; the Martins, who make a pleasant interlude of *Summer Is a Comin' In*; and some of Balanchine's earlier dance routines, which are light and imaginative. The later ones, except for a pony-ballet extravaganza, are too arty.

On the whole, however, the lady runs aground.

"The Lady Comes Across"

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *January 10, 1942*

"The Lady Comes Across," but Not Without a Hard Struggle

"The Lady Comes Across," musical comedy by Fred Thompson and Dawn Powell; music and lyrics by Vernon Duke and John LaTouche. Produced by George Hale at the 44th St. Theatre, New York, Jan. 9, 1942.

★ ★+

By BURNS MANTLE

SHOW business is pretty disappointing sometimes. Especially to producers. Take, as the most recent example, this musical comedy called "The Lady Comes Across," which started out originally as "She Had to Say Yes."

Dennis King was the first to fall for the lady, and, according to rumor, with a good part of his savings. There is a dream sequence in it, and I suspect Dennis thought perhaps he might develop another "I Married an Angel."

But "She Had to Say Yes" was a costly failure and was retired. Then the owner sold the scenery and their pick of the songs to George Hale and his friends, and they called in Fred Thompson and Dawn Powell to write a new book and fit Jessie Matthews, an English singing soubrette, with the story.

Bad Luck

Next thing we knew Miss Matthews was down with a fever and in the hospital, and Mr. Hale was paging Mitzi Green. Mitzi was busy or something, and he remembered a nice little blonde person named Evelyn Wyckoff who was playing more or less obscurely with Gertrude Lawrence in "Lady in the Dark," but who previously had toured in Shubert musicals and sung with success in the St. Louis' Municipal Opera.

Now Miss Wycoff leapt into the breach, learned the part in a couple of days and "The Lady Comes Across" opened at the 44th St. Theatre last night, having probably cost something like $200,000, first and last.

I wish we might make it a success story from there on, but unhappily that can't be done. What Mr. Hale has drawn out of the book, lyrics and music of "She Had to Say Yes" is definitely second grade musical comedy, and the stars with which he has strengthened the book find themselves handicapped beyond their powers of recovery.

Mischa Auer is a screen favorite, I'm told, and his comedic gift may be great if he is given good material. In the Thompson-Powell story he has nothing to do worth the doing.

Joe's Burden

Joe E. Lewis is a genius at entertaining night club crowds from the floor, but he is awkward and for the most part unhappy on a stage. He, too, is stranded in this book. He has two good songs which he has brought over from his personal repertoire, "February" and "You Can't Get the Merchandise."

Wynn Murray, thinned down to her old blond beauty status, gives voice (a lot of voice) to one or two songs, but without much enthusiasm. Ruth Weston, casting herself courageously into character woman comedy, talks one good number, "I'm the Queen of the Mezzanine," and then she's through.

Little Miss Wyckoff is happier than any of her associates. She has a voice and an attractive daintiness, and the early scenes of her dream sequence are nicely played.

Gower and Jeanne are an engaging team of dancers. The Martins give something to a couple of ensembles. George Balanchine has staged two or three good dance numbers and one Coney Island ballet burlesque I thought pretty sad.

The costumes, and sets, by Stewart Chaney, are colorful. But I can't see that Romney Brent and Morrie Ryskind have done their reputations any good as supervisors. Vernon Duke's music is also below his average. "Cold" Porter, I'd say. Too bad!

'THE LADY COMES ACROSS'

A musical comedy in two acts; book by Fred Thompson and Dawn Powell; music and lyrics by Vernon Duke and John LaTouche; choreography by George Balanchine; book directed by Romney Brent; scenery and costumes by Stewart Chaney; production under the supervision of Morrie Ryskind; presented at the Forty-fourth Street Theatre on January 9, 1942, by George Hale. The cast:

Jill Charters	Evelyn Wyckoff
Tony Patterson	Ronald Graham
Otis Kibber	Joe E. Lewis
Elmer James	Morton L. Stevens
Mary	Betty Douglas
Alberto Zorel	Stiano Braggiotti
Four Shoppers	The Martins
Mrs. Riverdale	Ruth Weston
Campbell	Gower (Champion)
Kay	Jeanne (Tyler)
Babs Appleway	Wynn Murray
Ernie Bustard	Mischa Auer
Baroness Helstrom	Helen Windsor
Ballerina Comique	Eugenia Delarova
Ballerina	Lubov Rostova
The Phantom Lover	Marc Platt

NEW YORK POST, *January 10, 1942*

"The Lady Comes Across," New Musical at the 44th Street

By WILELLA WALDORF

AFTER numerous vicissitudes, George Hale finally brought his new show, "The Lady Comes Across," into the 44th Street Theatre last night. In the interest of National Defense, the plot undertook to explain how the F. B. I. foiled a foreign spy in a fashionable dress shop, and discovered "the papers" hidden in a black and silver girdle. Just how this patriotic feat was accomplished was never very clear, but as we understand it, Mischa Auer (disguised as the Baroness Helstrom) cut the girdle off Ruth Weston (playing rich Mrs. Riverdale) with a large pair of shears. What the rest of the operatives were up to we doubt if even J. Edgar Hoover would be able to explain.

Fortunately, few people bothered with the plot last night except at rare intervals. "The Lady Comes Across" is actually more revue than musical comedy, if you care to go in for fine distinctions, and although it offers a large display of talent, nobody appears to be quite certain just what to do with it all. It is very loosely flung together in breathless style, giving the impression at times that it might be operating on the principle that the first people to reach the stage got first crack at the songs and dances.

Mr. Lewis and Mr. Auer

Of those assembled, Joe E. Lewis came off best. Having taken the precaution to arrive primed with some songs of his own, he extended his sympathy to Poor Little February, with only 28 days, and also obliged with "You Can't Get the Merchandise" and "The H. V. Kaltenborn Blues," the latter a stirring tribute to the clipped-voice radio commentator. Mr. Lewis, night club habitutes tell us, is a terribly funny fellow, and we found him very pleasant last night, though perhaps slightly overcome now and then by the size of the theatre and the insipid material that came his way when they passed around a slice of plot.

Mischa Auer, another comedian whom we happen to have seen before only in movie trailers telling what is coming next week (which is no way to be introduced to anybody), is still in something like the same stage at the 44th Street. He is often amusing, but you are constantly expecting him to come through with something genuinely droll, only to be disappointed. He is reduced sometimes to dreary slap-stick, and at one moment, dressed in female garb, he actually sprints before the curtain and leaps into the air, kicking his heels, something we have seen nobody do since the days of the Keystone Cops.

Wynn Murray, who can put over a song when there are any songs worth putting over, does something with "This Is Where I Came In." A neat quartette called The Martins turns in two rousing numbers in their own fetching style, with Gower and Jeanne, a graceful dance team, taking care of the ballroom stepping. Their dance featuring a dash of dialogue was nice enough except that dancers who talk when they dance, unfortunately, invariably pant a little unless they happen to be doing it on the screen, where it is possible to do the dancing one month and then wait until a year from next August to record the talking. On the stage, where the Aristotelian unities are more carefully preserved, this sort of thing won't work.

Ruth Weston and Stiano Braggiotti, both from the non-musical stage, undertook the heavy dramatic acting of the evening, Mr. Braggiotti being called upon to pose good-naturedly as an international spy, Miss Weston even lurching into a song or two without turning a hair. Her big number was a ditty explaining her passion for the Metropolitan Opera though hating music. Like most of the songs, it was elaborately obvious and none too tuneful, but it served.

The illness of Jessie Matthews, who had previously taken the star role, caused Mr. Hale to import Evelyn Wyckoff in a hurry from Gertrude Lawrence's supporting cast in "Lady in the Dark." Miss Wyckoff deserves great credit for being apparently letter perfect in her part (or what is left of it now that there is no longer a star in the show) and she sings "You Took Me by Surprise" and other of the pleasanter tunes with and without baritone help from Ronald Graham. Miss Wyckoff is a nice, talented little girl, but she is hardly the bombshell personality necessary to pull this strange conglomeration of musical comedy and revue together. Considering what she has to work with, however, we doubt very much if a combination of Katharine Cornell, Ethel Merman, Vera Zorina and an incendiary bomb could have made much effect on it.

George Balanchine's choreographic contributions were chiefly of a fantastic or burlesque nature, featuring Eugenia Delarova, Lubov Rostova and Marc Platt. The take-off on various numbers of the Ballet Russe was occasionally effective but seemed generally somewhat confused. Probably on the whole it is better to let the Ballet go right on burlesqueing itself, something it often does rather well.

"The Lady Comes Across"

NEW YORK TIMES, *January 10, 1942*

THE PLAY IN REVIEW

"The Lady Comes Across"

By BROOKS ATKINSON

LAST year some scenery worth quite a lot of money was abandoned from a musical show that decided not to come in, thank you. In any tolerant consideration of "The Lady Comes Across," which was put on at the Forty-fourth last evening, it is necessary to keep this highly materialistic fact in mind. It helps to explain the confusion, the dullness and the futility of this plot against music hall entertainment which has brought a number of strangely unrelated elements together on one stage. For the basis of "The Lady Comes Across" is the Stewart Chaney scenery that had to be abandoned last season, and the story, music and performing represent frugal improvisations on backdrops, draperies and hangings.

As the men of letters for the occasion, Fred Thompson and Dawn Powell have scribbled off a highly superfluous book about a dream and a spy hunt. Vernon Duke and John La Touche, who have been beating a steady retreat all season from their gifted music and lyrics for "Cabin in the Sky" last year, have turned out their most uninspired score to date. And George Balanchine, the choreographist, has done something special in the way of draining the joy out of musical stage dancing. Some of his elaborate set pieces look like intellectual persiflage, and the rest look like quotations from the "Book of the Dead."

* * *

Mischa Auer spreads a canopy of dullness over his antics as one of the comedians. Whatever Mr. Auer's gift may be, it is not for the part he is taking in this show. Most of the others have talents that are more recognizable, but the floor-plan of "The Lady Comes Across" keeps them from performing with any freedom. As the lady mentioned in the title, Evelyn Wyckoff is an enchanting young woman, with a good voice and a pretty manner. Wynn Murray, who is recovering some of her old aplomb after a year of shocking slenderizing, is singing a few songs with tolerable vigor and will probably be rolling them out with complete gusto next season, if she keeps on feeding well.

Ruth Weston is good-naturedly burlesquing an odious creature of fashion. Ronald Graham, a good baritone, sings when he is not trapped in the plot. Gower and Jeanne toss in a couple of excellent dance numbers, and the Martins, four in number, sing "Summer Is a Comin' In" with competent spontaneity. But Joe E. Lewis, a vaudeville mountebank, is the only performer who has a chance to show exactly what he can do. On three occasions he steps out of the plot to sing droll songs in a style that belongs in a musical show—a lament on the meager number of days in "February," a swinging dirge entitled "You Can't Get the Merchandise" (it's tough to get stuff under defense priorities) and his rhapsodic "H. V. Kaltenborn Blues." Mr. Lewis could have cut all his best capers without so many carloads of fine scenery.

NEW YORK WOLRD-TELEGRAM, *January 10, 1942*

Many Bright Spots in Lady Comes Across

By JOHN MASON BROWN

AFTER many vicissitudes unusual even in show business, where vicissitudes are served with each morning's coffee, George Hale rang up the curtain last night on The Lady Comes Across. Though heralded as ailing, and still something of a patient, The Lady in question is doing much better than was expected.

Obviously Mr. Hale's new musical is an expensive production. Its credit lines toss off well-known names lightly. Vernon Duke and John LaTouche, for example, are thanked in the program for the music and the lyrics. The choreography is by George Balanchine. The book has been directed by Romney Brent. And Stewart Chaney has done the settings and costumes.

Even when one looks up from the program there are features to be grateful for. The evening at the 44th Street may be no more than opulently routine at its best (which is evidently enough for most musical comedy addicts), but it can claim its amusing moments.

It is Joe E. Lewis who supplies most of these. Mr. Lewis is a very droll fellow, as patrons of the Copacabana tell me they have known for a long time. He has a hesitant approach to comedy which ends up by being in itself disarming. Uncertain as he may be when dialogue is his business, he wins an audience completely when he sings such a pathetic saga as February, rattles off the rowdy lyrics of You Can't Get the Merchandise or croons hilariously The H. V. Kaltenborn Blues.

Helping Mr. Lewis is Mischa Auer, who, though funny, never seems quite as funny as you think he is going to be or remember him as having been in the movies. Then Ruth Weston and Wynn Murray are on hand; the former to play a tough dowager, the latter to sing some songs not quite worthy of her vital talents. There are others, too. The Martins, for instance, who are a familiar foursome capable of chanting engagingly. And Ronald Graham, who is fuller of "the hero stuff" than was Thomas Carlyle, only in this case it is the musical comedy hero stuff. Finally, there is Evelyn Wyckoff, the charming young girl who stepped into Jessie Matthews' part when Miss Matthews was taken ill. She is pretty, graceful and agreeable and carries off a difficult assignment triumphantly.

Oh, yes. There is the book. I had almost forgotten about this, and only wish I could have done so. It is not much of a book, this story about a little girl whose dreams come true and who does some work for the FBI as another person's double—and finally gets her man. In fact, the book is one of the major contributors to the evening's dead spots; especially in its second act, when it seems just one jump ahead of the average Hasty Pudding, Mask and Wig and Princeton Triangle libretto.

Even so, The Lady Comes Across is, I suppose, faintly passable as Grade B or Grade C entertainment. No matter how uninspired you may find it, I think you will have to admit it has its bright spots. And the brightest of these is Joe E. Lewis.

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, *January 10, 1942*

Spies and Music

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

SOMETIMES the theater is pretty shameless about ignoring its dramatic opportunities. Here is the new musical show called "The Lady Comes Across," which has had all sorts of bad luck while getting ready for its metropolitan premiere. Everything had gone wrong, including the illness of the English star who had been imported for it. Nevertheless, with fine courage, the sponsors had gone ahead, determined to give us a show. A young actress, with virtually no Broadway experience, was given the leading role, in a situation equivalent to the famous fictional one wherein the understudy goes on in the star's role and becomes the toast of the season. By all the rules of suspense and climax the show should have surprised every one and turned out to be a triumph. Instead, with a rare neglect of its big chance, it proves to be a mediocre entertainment.

* * *

It is not that "The Lady Comes Across" is without its virtues. The young actress who stepped into the star's part, Miss Evelyn Wyckoff, late of "Lady in the Dark," is pretty, talented and pleasantly modest. Joe E. Lewis, one of the great men of the night clubs, sings some characteristic songs with his customary magnificence. The dance team of Gower and Jeanne is freshly charming. The four Martins sing pleasantly. The score is at least passable and some of the dances are attractively staged. A lot of the girls are good looking. It merely happens that, in addition to all this, the book is painful and the comedy, save when Mr. Lewis is singing, is embarrassing. "The Lady Comes Across" is not a musical comedy mess. It is merely routine and given to a sort of well-meaning inefficiency.

Although the plot is some foolishness about spies, it does start out in promising fashion. At least, it strikes me that there were possibilities in the idea of a girl, who has dreamed that she is the heroine of a thrilling anti-espionage case, actually finding herself entangled in such a case and startling the F. B. I. by her brilliance, merely because things happened to her just as she knew that they would from her dream. It doesn't take the book of "The Lady Comes Across" long, however, to destroy any hopeful possibilities in the most dire fashion. Then, I must confess, too, that the comic ballets didn't entertain me as much as they should have, possibly because it often is difficult for me to tell the humorous from the serious in such matters. I trust that Mr. Terry, the erudite dance critic, will not think too hard of me for this blindness.

* * *

As I have said, Miss Wyckoff is a likable young actress and Mr. Lewis is a delight, particularly when he sings. In fact, most of the playing is pleasant, although Miss Ruth Weston, always an excellent comedienne, is certainly not aided by much of her material. But is impossible to let Mr. Mischa Auer, of the movies, off even on the plea of the feeble opportunities given him. On the screen Mr. Auer has often seemed decidedly comic. On the stage, I am afraid that his hilarity has a tendency to desert him and leave him in the unhappy predicament of making faces and gestures all over the place while achieving nothing but the satisfaction of having toiled. Miss Wynn Murray is industrious, also. "The Lady Comes Across" is not likely to add tremendously to the gayety of a world in turmoil.

"Johnny on a Spot"

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, *January 9, 1942*

John Shubert Presents MacArthur's Story on a Spot

By JOHN MASON BROWN

I CAN'T for the life of me remember whether it was the Frenchman who saw the Dutchman, or the Dutchman who saw the Frenchman, kissing his cow and said, "Everyone to his own taste." It doesn't really matter. I bring it up now only because, regardless of which of them was supposed to say it, the fellow who spoke those words was a tolerant man. As such I envied him last night. But then I kept trying to console myself for my own lacks by thinking "To see another person kiss a cow is one thing, but to have to see Johnny on a Spot yourself is quite another." So I trust I will be forgiven if what follows should strike those of you who have not sat out Charles MacArthur's new play as intolerant.

Mr. MacArthur has derived the comedy with which the young John Shubert made his debut as a producer at the Plymouth last evening from a story credited to Parke Levy and Alan Lipscott. It is a story I have not read, and freely confess that I do not at present feel inclined to rush out and devour.

As everyone knows Mr. MacArthur was the co-author in 1928 with Ben Hecht of The Front Page. This newspaper play of theirs made—and deserved to make—theatrical history. It was hardboiled, skillful, cynical. Written by two gifted and irreverent authors that Jed Harris once happily described as the Katzenjammer Kids of our literature, The Front Page was a perfect expression of the desire for "the low-down" which was then so common.

* * *

But the '40s are not the '20s. And, though Johnny on a Spot belongs to that remote decade in its would-be tough attitude, most assuredly it is not even a kissing cousin of The Front Page. Indeed, I doubt if any of us would have found Johnny on a Spot diverting 14 years ago. Just now it seems more like a yellowed clipping, found in a forgotten scrapbook, than a play freshly written. It huffs and puffs, but it does not blow the house down.

Its concern is the difficulties which overtake a group of corrupt political henchmen in a Southern state when they discover on election night that the drunken Governor, who is now running for United States Senator, has dropped dead at his favorite bordello. Although these crooks pretend that the unseen Governor is still alive, their ultimate concern is retrieving his misplaced body. The complications are many and juvenile. And the taste is always of the worst.

Only once in what seems like a millenium does a really amusing line make itself heard. The rest of the evening is all noise, cops-and-robbers toughness, and the kind of body-snatching humor which I doubt would amuse even an attendant in the morgue. As an example of Mr. MacArthur's wayward gaiety may I submit that he appears to relish rigor mortis as a joke and to think it awfully funny that buzzards should finally be needed to locate the missing Governor's body.

* * *

Less debatable than the evening's taste is the silly hurly-burly of its action. All the panting, heaving, and door-slamming is breathless, superficial, and incredibly sedative. Thus it becomes a sort of reflection of "Front Page" technique and "Twentieth Century" rowdyism, and is aimed straight at the crowd that finds fun in corruption, glory in crime and dirt in everything. It takes courage of a sort to be thus completely and frankly uninhibited.

The background of "Johnny on a Spot" is the same as that which gave Morrie Ryskind and Buddy DeSylva their "Louisiana Purchase." It is the story of a completely corrupt state government in the South.

Southern Politics

The Governor of the state is an alcoholic who has collapsed in what used to be called a house of ill repute run by Pearl Lamonte. It is the eve of an election day that his friends hope will send the governor to the U. S. Senate.

The Governor's bright young campaign manager, Nicky Allen, backed by the crowd of political crooks who have been fattening on state graft, arrange to keep the campaign going by covering the governor's advertised final speech by a recording made for such emergencies.

When they discover that the governor is dead, Nicky and the others continue their conspiracy by sneaking the body out of the bagnio and smuggling it into the State house.

They are badgered and threatened by an opposition press, but the playwright and producer are on their side. These two do not leave a single little trick unturned in bringing off the coup and digging for laughs.

"Johnny on a Spot" is fast and violent. Keenan Wynn performs as the amazingly resourceful Nicky, taking hurdles, jumps, complications and Edith Atwater in a stride that is speedy and sure.

Miss Atwater, with one exception, is the only person in the cast laying even slight claim to decency in her private life, and she must condone all the criminality afoot.

The exception is a convict forger brought in from the state prison to forge the governor's signature. He had got religion the week before, but is induced to do a bit of backsliding in the cause of charity.

The principal strumpets are played by Dennie Moore, with a neat appreciation of a madam's vulnerability, and Florence Sundstrom, who represents the lively young South on the make.

The chief crooks are convincingly characterized by Paul Huber, Will Geer, Joseph Sweeney and Tito Vuolo. The state house setting is nicely realized by Frederick Fox, and the young Shubert has not spared expense in any division of his first major production. Mr. MacArthur's direction is as jumpy as a flea circus and skillfully inventive.

Support of "Johnny on a Spot" is entirely a matter of taste. If you resent spending an evening with crooks and their ladies, avoid it. If you are for anything that gives you a laugh, it may be worth the chance. There was considerable laughter last night.

'JOHNNY ON A SPOT'

A comedy in three acts by Charles MacArthur; based on a story by Parke Levy and Alan Lipscott; settings and costumes by Frederick Fox; directed by Mr. MacArthur and produced by John Shubert at the Plymouth Theater on January 8, 1942.

The cast:

St. John	Robert Williams
McClure	Arthur Marlowe
Chronical Reporter	Richard Karlan
Chronicle Cameraman	Burton Mallory
Danny	William Foran
Bulletin Cameraman	Kenneth Toby
Ben Kusick	Paul Huber
Creeper	Sanford Bickert
Julie Glynn	Edith Atwater
Heeler	Tom Morrison
Doc Blossom	Will Geer
Nicky Allen	Keenan Wynn
Salesman	Jack McCauley
Barbara Webster	Florence Sundstrom
Lucius	Olivester Polk
Colonel Wigmore	Mitchell Harris
Mayor Lovett	Charles Olcott
Pepi Pisano	Tito Vuolo
Pearl Lamonte	Dennie Moore
Judge Webster	Joseph Sweeney
Chief of Police	G. Swayne Gordon
Flanagan	Harry Meehan
Sergeant of State Troopers	John O'Malley
Warden	Ben Roberts
Dapper	Garnay Wilson
Captain of State Troopers	Jack Brainard
Policeman	Michael Barrett
Policeman	Charles Gordon

Young Mr. Shubert has assembled some agreeable players. Edith Atwater is a lovely and capable performer. Keenan Wynn works industriously as the dead Governor's manager. Dennie Moore has her uninhibited fun as a mopsy. Joseph Sweeney provides some amusing moments as a political crook. Will Geer gets as far with a characterization of another eccentric public servant as the text will permit him to. And Frederick Fox has designed a setting for the Governor's office which deserves a better administration.

But Johnny on a Spot is all sound and fury, signifying nothing but tedium and wasted energy. It is so dead itself that one wonders how it dares to mention buzzards.

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *January 9, 1942*

'Johnny On a Spot' Violates All Rules Just for the Fun of It

"Johnny on a Spot," comedy by Charles MacArthur, from a story by Parke Levy and Alan Lipscott. Produced by John Shubert at the Plymouth Theatre, New York, Jan. 8, 1942.

★ ★+

By BURNS MANTLE

FOR sheer audacity this "Johnny on a Spot" should win a citation of some sort. Perhaps impertinence would be a better word than audacity. Anyway, it is as complete a violation of all the rules that usually govern the writing and staging of farce as has been revealed within a fairly long playgoing memory.

Charles MacArthur did it. Took a story foundation from two (maybe four) other fellows and shot it full of his particular type of police court humor.

Then he staged it for young John Shubert, who evidently isn't burdened with any more reverence for theatre conventions than is Charles himself.

"Johnny on a Spot"

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN, *January 9, 1942*

'Johnny on a Spot' Opens at Plymouth

Will Geer and Edith Atwater Appear in Farce by Charles MacArthur

By JOHN ANDERSON

AS ONE of the more katzenjammer celebrities Charles MacArthur has contributed his share of hilarity to both Broadway and Hollywood, but in "Johnny on a Spot" presented by John Shubert at the Plymouth last night the supply of merriment seemed to be running pretty low. In fact, when they brought on an iron lung in the last act as the chief gag of the plot it seemed fatally symbolic. For if ever a play was kept alive by artificial respiration, this one is it.

It isn't exactly kept alive, for it never seems to live, but it is kept hopping around rather vigorously while Mr. MacArthur and an energetic cast jab it with hopeful hypodermics of humor in frenzied efforts to keep it going. The result is a sort of desperate animation, hollow and cheerless and depressing.

Mr. MacArthur's plot is so complicated that I thought he might have to stop the play any moment and go home for some spare parts. Ultimately you can hardly see the action for the gadgets, for like any other jalopy it seems to have everything except a motor.

Here are all the trimmings of goofy farce-comedy in situations that are supposed to pile laugh on laugh, but which never gather enough momentum to turn the trick.

Mr. MacArthur's playground is the office of the Governor of a Southern State on the eve of an election in which Gov. Upjohn is running for the U. S. Senate, with the usual political chicanery, the usual stage editor threatening a law suit, crowds of reporters, a lovely secretary and a young fellow named Nicky Allen who is the Governor's little Mr. Fixit.

Plenty to Fix

He has a lot to fix, for within five minutes of the time of the Governor's final broadcast His Excellency is found dead in a local brothel. From then on Mr. MacArthur's fertile, if macabre imagination runs fancy free with the plot, chasing the corpse around the town, fending off suspicious reporters, producing the broadcast from records, forging the dead Governor's signature to State papers and, in general, performing the usual skylarking skullduggeries that make good farce hilarious and bad farce painfully unfunny.

A love story is snatched up and put down from time to time without interesting anyone that I noticed, including even the couple involved and after a long game of mortuary hide and seek the Governor's body is sneaked past the watching reporters in an iron lung supposedly brought in to save his life. By then it seemed not only a poor joke, but a poor joke in poorer taste.

The plot moves like exhausted clockwork through the evening and there are momentary flashes of the real MacArthur humor—a line, a small incident, enough to recognise the touch that made "The Front Page" (with due credit to Ben Hecht) an uproarious evening in the theatre. But they are only flashes.

Directed by Author

Under the author's direction it is all played at the fast clip which farce should have when it is billowed along by laughter, but which, lacking the laughter, seems artificially violent. Keenan Wynn, son of the great Ed, must feel fated to be in plays about wayward corpses (Remember the dead man on roller skates in "The More the Merrier") but he works vigorously to carry the show along. He plays blandly and buoyantly as if he had the plot in his vest pocket, when it can be seen all over him more like a suit of armour, dragging him down.

Such excellent and popular players as Will Geer, Edith Atwater, Joseph Sweeney, and Dennie Moore, put their utmost into it, together with a large cast, and Frederick Fox has set it handsomely in a bright and frisky office, designed for good fun if not good government.

It gets neither.

NEW YORK TIMES, *January 9, 1942*

THE PLAY IN REVIEW

"Johnny on a Spot"

By BROOKS ATKINSON

NO ONE can say that Charles MacArthur has not given his all. In "Johnny On a Spot," which was acted at the Plymouth last evening, he has torn up his joke book and heaped the pages into three acts of breathless nonsense; and a long cast of actors, headed by Keenan Wynn, goes scuffling through at high speed. When Mr. MacArthur was collaborating with Ben Hecht on "The Front Page" and "Twentieth Century," this method of whirring fantastification worked up into tumultuously humorous plays.

But it works up into nothing more than a binge in the present instance—noise, energy and confusion with an occasional hilarious line popping out of the brawl. It is a strange episode in theatre highjinks. "Johnnie On a Spot" outsmarts itself with comic facility. Half as much humor might be twice as funny if it were put in the shape of a play.

* * *

Working on the general theory that there are dishonest and vulgar people in the world, Mr. MacArthur plunges into the Governor's office of a Southern State where the highbinders and stumblebums are operating on a lavish scale. Every one is dependent upon the Governor, who is running for United States Senator on a ticket of drawl and demagoguery. But the point of "Johnny On a Spot" is that the Governor, who is the chief character in the play, never appears on the stage. He is on a bender through the first act; his death is reported from a sporting house as the first-act climax. For a number of reasons, which are never clear in the play, it is necessary for his henchmen to keep his death secret for twenty-four hours until they can cover up some of his most flagrant peculations and arrange a more respectable place for his demise.

* * *

Enough happens in "Johnny On a Spot" to make a dozen funnier cartoons. Or perhaps it only gives the impression of happening. For the final curtain leaves nothing but a dazed memory of reporters, cops, trollopes, forgers, grafters, and idiots on a treadmill of gags—all of it bedlam, some of it shot through with slap-dash merriment. As his own director, Mr. MacArthur has been his own worst friend. The performance is all in one key of vertigo. As the virtuoso governor's campaign manager, Keenan Wynn plays like champion of a six-day bicycle race. He is the most accomplished young comedian in our theatre. When a good script falls into his hands he is going to make Broadway sit up and take notice, and what he accomplishes will be for the script and not for himself, for he is on the level as a performer.

* * *

Among the simpler pleasures of low comedy, this reporter cherishes the memory of Joseph Sweeney as a cadaverous and unctuous charlatan reading some purple balderdash over the radio, Dennie Moore adding gleam and gusto to the unsalted pate of a parlor house queen, and Will Geer teetering through the part of an amiable quack. The beautiful Edith Atwater plays a smitten secretary in good spirit, and Florence Sundstrom is frightening as a sharp-clawed hussy. What didoes Mr. MacArthur has put them up to they ably perform. But all jokes and no work make "Johnny On a Spot" a dull play.

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
January 9, 1942

A Dead Man Tells A Tale From Dixie

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

IT'S that kind of season: Mr. MacArthur has failed too. Not from being stingy, mind you; he tossed around an awful lot of people last night and an awful lot of plot, and had doors keep opening and elevators keep closing and a macaw in the first act and an iron lung in the last; but there was much more commotion than comedy. *Johnny On a Spot* is just a loud, rackety, Model T farce, which any amount of desperate cranking really can't keep going.

The idea itself, at this date, isn't very breath-taking. It's crooked Southern politics again, with a lot of familiar skulduggery and a lot of familiar twists of plot. Politics, it seems to me, is always better material for satire than for farce, but if farce is the destination, it at least should take a less even road than the present one.

Anyway, in *Johnny On a Spot*, a governor with a splendid record for lechery, drunkenness and picking the public's pockets, is running for the Senate. On election eve, when he should be making an important radio address, he has passed out cold at the residence of a troflop. His campaign manager gets around that one by putting him on the air via some records he has made, only to learn while the broadcast is at its height that the candidate has not simply passed out, but passed beyond.

Having pulled that boner, the henchman has to go to considerable lengths to cover it up, and to keep himself and the rest of the boys out of jail. The death has to be kept a secret. The dead man has to be smuggled out of the fancy lady's house. The candidate has to win the election, even though he's a corpse. A terrific lot of complications ensue—it wouldn't be fair to tell you what they are. Or, for that matter, easy. Mr. MacArthur whips up a good gag now and then, but his frenzied and gymnastic plot has little to recommend it.

Though Mr. MacArthur's direction is lively enough, it only emphasizes that he is frantically beating an old horse. The cast is uneven, but Keenan Wynn does a likeable and spirited job with the role of the henchman. Edith Atwater is pleasant as the governor's secretary, Joseph Sweeney is amazing as one of the governor's crooked colleagues and Dennie Moore gives the liveliest performance of the evening as the governor's cutie.

"Johnny on a Spot"

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, *January 9, 1942*

Death of a Statesman

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

ALTHOUGH it stems from the rowdy and boisterous school of "The Front Page," the new farce called "Johnny on a Spot" seems more labored than hearty and more ponderous than antic. Striving with grim determination to tell a gayly satirical tale about crooked politicians in a Southern state, Charles MacArthur's latest play is so effortful and heavy-handed an attempt to be jauntily Rabelaisian that its potential merriment is almost totally destroyed. These noisy, bounding farces should have at least a hint of spontaneity about them, but the work at the Plymouth Theater is so painfully fabricated and so pantingly presented that a great air of fatigue takes the place of the required hilarity. Only when that fine actor, Joseph Sweeney, is taking the show in his own hands does "Johnny on a Spot" offer any suggestion of uproariousness.

* * *

Perhaps the state of the nation has at least something to do with the fact that the play is so lacking in festivity. Somehow the frantic efforts of corrupt politicians to get out of being exposed do not readily make for merriment any more. But the work's failure to amuse cannot be blamed entirely on any such extraneous matter as bad timing. The chief trouble is merely that Mr. MacArthur has tried with fine desperation to substitute energy and strenuous action for humor and genuine satire, and that the substitution doesn't seem to work out any more. Here he is telling what happened when the governor of an unnamed state to the south of us died in what will be described here fancily as a bagnio, just as he was about to be elected to the Senate, and his friends and associates tried to cover up what had happened. He doesn't make it seem very funny.

* * *

Back in 1928, or thereabouts, this brash, rough-and-ready type of fooling did have a way of seeming very funny. In these days, though, it didn't give evidence of having been so laboriously ground out; at least when it was encountered in such a work as the aforementioned "The Front Page." This time the efforts of the lamented governor's smart Northern campaign manager and faithful secretary to pretend that their candidate is still alive and to find his missing body before the enemy newspaper finds out about the scandal result in a minimum of entertainment and a maximum of determined striving after laughter. In truth, the author and the actors work so hard that you can't help feeling sorry that their labors are so unavailing. Mr. MacArthur has given us the materials for scornful political satire, but he has been unable to make them seem either pointed or comic.

* * *

At the close of the first act there are a few moments when the play captures the sort of fiercely comic mood that it is striving for, and, as I have said, Mr. Sweeney, one of the best actors in America, is responsible for them. As a hypocritical old scoundrel of a judge, he is supposed to be delivering a rambling speech introducing the defunct governor, and he manages it so brilliantly that you begin to see what Mr. MacArthur meant. For the rest of the time, however, even the excellent and vigorous work of such players as Keenan Wynn, Miss Edith Atwater, Will Geer, Miss Florence Sundstrom and Miss Dennie Moore, aided by Tito Vuolo, Garnay Wilson, Robert Williams and others, is unavailing. Mr. Wynn is a good farceur, Miss Atwater handles her now accustomed role of sardonic secretary ably, and Miss Sundstrom, with more of a character to portray, is rather amusing, but "Johnny On a Spot" is laboriously dull.

NEW YORK SUN, *January 9, 1942*

'Johnny On a Spot,' MacArthur Farce Comedy, Opens at the Plymouth

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

ALL the proper ingredients of rough-and-tumble farce seem to be in Charles MacArthur's "Johnny On a Spot," which opened last evening at the Plymouth Theater. Things go on every minute, reporters swarm and political chicanery is rampant. Lovers, true and mercenary, are in almost constant action. There is even a missing body and there are, as a matter of public record, few things this department enjoys more than a good missing body.

It is therefore with some perplexity that I report very moderate enjoyment of "Johnny On a Spot." It looked like a funny farce, raucous, sometimes scandalous and always very hearty. Now and then it sounded like a funny farce, and Mr. MacArthur, acting as director, put the pressure on some very sprightly actors, so that they shot out in all directions, like jumping beans. It is difficult to say why the final outcome seemed so mechanical and spiritless, so desperate and clanking a pursuit of merriment.

Mr. MacArthur, an expert in such affairs, has concocted a madly ingenious plot. It is concerned basically with the abrupt demise of a Southern Governor just as the electors were about to make him a Southern Senator. This was highly inconvenient to his henchmen and, since good old Johnny passed away at Pearl's place, sufficiently scandalous. So they had to postpone the Governor's official death until after the votes were counted. And, of course, they misplaced the body.

There is little predictable about the rest of the plot. The love of the Governor's campaign manager for the Governor's secretary is in it; the city and State police are in it, and a religious forger brought down from prison to do a spot of useful forging. There is much about the theft of millions which were to have built a maternity hospital. Pearl dressed up in a nurse's costume, all but her back. Barbara, a cutting from some old Southern poison oak, pursues Nicky, the hero. Felonies are compounded to right and left, and at intervals logic flies out the window. So it should be in melodramatic farce.

But it should be funnier. Once around the track any farce should go on its own momentum, without further pushing. And this one doesn't seem to.

Actors may be detected laboring ably in the confusion. Keenan Wynn is excitedly amusing, and Edith Atwater handsomely caustic. Dennie Moore and Joseph Sweeney, Will Geer and Florence Sundstrom play actively and without error. Tito Vuolo is explosive, and Garnay Wilson is comical. All of the proper ingredients; only a trace of the proper fun.

NEW YORK POST, *January 9, 1942*

"Johnny on a Spot" Opens at the Plymouth Theatre

By WILELLA WALDORF

"JOHNNY ON A SPOT," produced at the Plymouth Theatre last night, has all the elements of a good farce except one. It isn't funny.

Charles MacArthur, who wrote it (from a story by a couple of other fellows), has set the whole business in the Governor's office of a corrupt Southern State on the eve of election day. His Excellency is running for Senator and has promised to keep reasonably sober until the festivities are over. Instead he gets very drunk and dies inopportunely in the town's leading bawdy-house.

Since the Mayor and the police force, urged on by the opposition newspaper, are flinging five million dollar lawsuits around and threatening to turn the spotlight on some of the local graft, the late Governor's dynamic campaign manager and his henchmen decide to keep the chief executive alive until after the election, when they can arrange to have him die more suitably in the privacy of his own office.

This necessitates a phoney broadcast with recordings, wild battles with a battalion of reporters reminiscent of "The Front Page," dozens of frantic telephone calls; dressing up Pearl Lamonte, the well-known "madam," as a trained nurse; smuggling the governor's body out of the bawdy-house and into the State House via a Chinese laundry, a truck and an iron lung; and dragging a convicted felon out of the penitentiary to forge the Governor's signature, only to discover that the forger has decided to go straight.

Acting as director as well as author, Mr. MacArthur has lined up a large company of good farceurs including Keenan Wynn, Edith Atwater, Dennie Moore and Joseph Sweeney, who do everything but turn handsprings to keep the audience amused, but despite their best efforts, "Johnny on a Spot" stubbornly refuses to be funny.

This struck us as more and more astonishing as the evening went on, for Keenan Wynn himself is a very comical fellow, Dennie Moore generally makes us laugh merely by being Dennie Moore, and Edith Atwater is again playing a harassed secretary just as she did in "The Man Who Came to Dinner."

It seemed incredible that their strenuous activities should prove so depressing, but the fact remains that "Johnny on a Spot" not only failed to amuse this reporter, but even left us faintly nauseated. It all seemed, in fact, rather curiously out of date and not, perhaps, in the best of taste at any time.

"Papa Is All"

NEW YORK TIMES, *January 7, 1942*

THE PLAY IN REVIEW

"Papa Is All"

By BROOKS ATKINSON

THINGS being as they are in the world just now, the Theatre Guild has been obliging enough to put on a light and completely entertaining play. "Papa Is All" is what they are calling it in Pennsylvania Dutch idiom, and it was acted at headquarters last evening. Although the author, Patterson Greene, a Pacific Coast critic, lived for some time near Lancaster, Pa., he would probably not insist that his play represents Pennsylvania Dutch life closely. What he has written is a popular comedy with a funny plot and a background of Mennonite manners. Since he has done his job in workmanlike fashion and the Guild has staged his comedy with spirit, the subscribers can look forward to a well-bred lark in a folksy style that seems almost to have dropped out of the theatre. The whole thing looks as easy as rolling off a log, which is part of the pleasure of seeing it.

* * *

Papa is a tyrannical curmudgeon, club-footed, ugly tempered, not above taking the whip to his son and daughter. He has religious scruples against machinery, motion pictures and conveniences or pleasures of any kind. But his son and daughter suspect that his scruples are merely a way of keeping them on the farm as forced slave labor, and his Mennonite wife is inclined to agree with her children. No one has any use for Papa. When he sweeps off in a rage with a pistol to shoot a young surveyor who is attracted to his daughter, the family realizes that something desperate has to be done to remove Papa from society. Apparently the gods are on the family's side. The car in which Papa is riding to his shooting is fortunately wrecked at a railroad crossing, and Papa happily disappears. "Papa is all," in fact—all gone.

* * *

Since the amusement that Mr. Greene's comedy provides is derived chiefly from the plot, this department must not go into any further particulars. But it breaks no confidence to report that everything depends upon hating papa and rejoicing sinfully in his unpleasantness at the railroad crossing. It reminds this department of a scandalous bit of doggerel that very wicked little boys used to shout to horrify each other when they were far away from home:

Horray, hooray, my father's going to be hung,
Hooray, hooray, the mean, old son-of-a-gun.
He was very cross to me when I was very young,
Now I'm going to get even with my father.

To come back to more civilized things, "Papa Is All" has been well staged by Frank Carrington and Agnes Morgan. The setting, designed by Emeline Roche, represents the kitchen of the House of Miller at Millbach, Pa.: it is most inviting. After a considerable tour in other parts of the East, the performance is conspicuously well oiled and slips along with considerable humor.

Carl Benton Reid plays Papa with a snarl and ferocity that make the incident at the railroad crossing an occasion of civic betterment. Jessie Royce Landis plays the mother with mincing charm and knowing stagecraft. As the daughter of the house, Celeste Holm is worth as fine a suitor as Mr. Greene can conjure out of his romantic imagination. Emmett Rogers plays the brother with spontaneity, and Royal Beal, a Harvard man, makes as good a State trooper as you could hope for. After an itinerant career as mistress of a one-woman show, Dorothy Sands is back in town, playing a neighborhood jaw-box with broad and humorous versatility.

Taking one thing with another, "Papa Is All" is a lot of fun.

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, *January 7, 1942*

Papa Legree

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

HAVING nothing better to do these days, the drama is giving us some folk lore. Last week it reported on the lives and customs of the Scandinavian-Americans of the Northwest in an ill-fated play called "The First Crocus." Now, with the Theater Guild as sponsor, it is providing a lecture on the quaint customs of the Pennsylvania Dutch in a new comedy known as "Papa Is All." In both works the investigations into the folkways of the nation prove more enlivening than the story the playwrights have had to tell. The newer comedy, which has more showmanship and less an air of veracity than its hapless predecessor, is mild, slender and unexciting, but it does succeed in being faintly diverting. It would do to pass the time, which may not be enough in this particular year in our annals.

* * *

Let me make just one more comparison with "The First Crocus" before passing on to other matters. The Scandinavian-American play was about a tyrant mother who whined. The Pennsylvania Dutch comedy is concerned with a tyrant father who lashes about him with a whip. A veritable Simon Legree in appearance and conduct but deprived of any Uncle Tom to torment, the monster in Patterson Greene's "Papa Is All" is certainly the most unpleasant character currently to be found outside of the Axis nations. When, just before the end of the second act, the son of this eminent gentleman returns with the cheerful news that Papa has just been run over by an express train, audience and actors beam in approval. As usual, though, there were cynics who felt that the defunct father would be back for the third act.

* * *

As usual, too, the cynics were right. It is a way they have, particularly in the theatre. Anyway, it turns out that the old fellow had merely been conked over the head and tossed into a passing coal car, so there he is back again, up to more mischief. At this point, fortunately, the author, who hadn't been bothering much about plot, made up for lost time, with gun play and things, and in the end you will be happy to know that Papa is carted off to a jail that is no doubt too good for him. All of this is told with no particular effort to provide a story of sturdiness or originality, but with a proper emphasis on the quaint language and presumably picturesque customs of the people it is observing. This makes the familiar goings-on of the plot more engaging than they might otherwise have been, but it cannot conceal the fact that beneath the engaging accents you will find some stenciled characters of the drama.

* * *

Speaking of stencils, it will be necessary for me to bring out a few more when telling you about the acting, since once more it is far superior to the play in which it appears. For example, Miss Jessie Royce Landis gives a thoroughly charming and honestly lovable performance as the bullied mother of the family. It is a portrayal every bit as fine as she offered in Mr. Sarovan's "Love's Old Sweet Song." Miss Celeste Holm, an interesting and versatile young actress, is delightful as the daughter, and Emmett Rogers is first rate as the son. In smaller roles Miss Dorothy Sands as a gossipy neighbor and Royal Beal as an upright and sympathetic state policeman are of much help, while Carl Benton Reid as the villain out of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" plays with genuine force and effectiveness. If "Papa Is All" lived up to the quality of its playing it would be more worthy than it is of the historic Theatre Guild.

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
January 7, 1942

Papa Is All Is Folksy Comedy About the Pennsylvania Dutch

By JOHN MASON BROWN

IN CASE you are not lucky enough to be an authority on the Pennsylvania Dutch, Papa Is All is a title which, when translated into a slightly more universal language, means father is dead. Certainly the members of his family have every reason to hope that this should be so in Patterson Greene's patricidal comedy which the Theatre Guild presented at the Guild Theatre last evening.

The Mennonite father in Papa Is All is a domestic tyrant sufficiently aggressive to make even the elder Moulton-Barrett of Whimpole Street fame look to his switches. He is a hard, mean man with a mind as tightly closed as his mouth is set. No wonder his family revolts. No wonder an audience is pleased when such a father's day ends up by being mother's play.

* * *

The causes and the story of this rebellion have been set forth by Mr. Greene in a mild little comedy which takes place in the kitchen of a farmhouse north of Lancaster. The play luxuriates in those droll Germanic idioms of the Pennsylvania Dutch in which the verb trails the train of thought like a caboose. It is a very folksy folk play—slight, inconsequential, and labored—which can boast its amusing interludes.

Jessie Royce Landis gives the best performance which I, for one, have seen her give as the mother who is one of the worms that turn. Beneath her gray wig she projects a definite, clearly modulated characterization which is full of illusion and charm. Dorothy Sands, though using an accent which sounded at times suspiciously Yiddish to these alien ears, creates with much unction and skill a highly diverting neighborhood gossip. Carl Benton Reid is properly fearsome as the tyrannical Papa whose death would only spell freedom for his family. And Emmett Rogers and Celeste Holm are pleasant as the son and daughter who wish their father ill.

* * *

But the play suffers from malnutrition. It has too little plot and too few characters to go around. Accordingly, despite its moments of genuine entertainment, it cannot help seeming like a tureen of bouillon made from two cubes. The Guild would have been wiser to keep it out of town.

"Papa Is All"

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN, *January 7, 1942*

'Papa Is All' Opens at the Guild Theatre

Jessie Royce Landis Plays Patient Wife in Comedy of Pennsylvania Dutch

By JOHN ANDERSON

IN ONE of its more antic moods the Theatre Guild brought to the holy boards of the Mother House last night a mild little folk comedy of the Pennsylvania Dutch, written by Patterson Greene and titled "Papa Is All." If you ask me "Papa is all what?" I shall only have to stop and explain patiently that "all" is used by the Pennsylvania Dutch to mean through, gone or finished, and that in this instance it means that Papa, who had it coming to him, is washed up, dead, conked, and out.

The trouble with the Aukamps, however, was that Papa wasn't quite all, and when Mama Aukamp discovered that inconvenient fact she asked hopefully, "Not any?"

You will discover from this that the Aukamps didn't like Papa, and I must say I couldn't blame them. Papa was strict Mennonite and would have no modern improvement in the house unless he could find excuse for it in the Bible—no phone, electricity, plumbing—nothing. Mama was a drudge; son Jake wasn't even allowed to make drawings for his Correspondence School, and daughter Emma had to talk to her boy friend across the farm fence. If they so much as mentioned a movie, Papa would take a whip to them.

This tyrannical rule left the Aukamps' social life somewhat cramped, and the rebellious Jake finally decided to do something constructive about the situation—something like whamming Pa with a monkey wrench—when the old boy was out trying to shoot Emma's sweetie. Pa disappeared in what seemed to be an automobile accident, and the family sighed with relief at the end of the second act as it went happily into mourning. In the ensuing intermission I offered to wager George Jean Nathan that Papa wasn't all at all, and would return for the third act, but the crafty Mr. Nathan, who knows the old tyrant plot better than I do, demanded odds of a hundred to one and I found I didn't care that much whether Papa was all or only partly all.

If you interrupt me again at this juncture and say "Come, come, Anderson, are you trying to pan this play, or are you kidding somebody?" I should be obliged to admit that I am giving it the once over lightly. It is mildly humorous, quaint, and carefully artless. Its talk is funny for a while, and then gets in the way a bit.

'PAPA IS ALL'

A comedy in three acts by Patterson Greene; staged by Frank Carrington and Agnes Morgan; setting and costumes by Emeline Roche; presented at the Guild Theatre by the Theatre Guild on January 6, 1942. The cast:

Mama	Jessie Royce Landis
Jake	Emmett Rogers
State Trooper Brendle	Royal Beal
Emma	Celeste Holm
Mrs. Yoder	Dorothy Sands
Papa	Carl Benton Reid

Its characters and customs have a certain postcard quality, with the tentative charm of reading the National Geographic Magazine in the dentist's office. You know very well you're waiting for something else, and in "Papa Is All" there isn't anything else.

It isn't good enough as a play to be satisfying and not bad enough to make much difference. Since it is a borderline case it is only fair to report that passages which I found merely amiable seemed to throw more susceptible First Nighters into happy and enviable guffaws. Ah, well. It takes all kinds of worlds to make an audience.

Under the direction of Frank Carrington and Agnes Morgan the Guild has given it an excellent production. Jessie Royce Landis presents a delightful portrait of the patient wife who couldn't stand the Pennsylvania Dutch Life with Father. She gives the character the necessary shading to make its quiet comedy effective, and presents a glowing contrast in the short but happy space when Papa appears to be all.

She is ably assisted by Emmett Rogers as Jake and by Celeste Holm as Emma. Dorothy Sands may be duly welcomed back in the part of an amusing chatterbox, which she plays with much relish, and Carl Benton Reid provides a fearful and fascinating picture of the glowering Aukamp who, like many devils, has somehow got himself confused with God.

I found it, if I may borrow a phrase from the Senior Columnist, pleasantly uninteresting.

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *January 7, 1942*

At Least There Is Nothing to Worry About in "Papa Is All"

"Papa Is All," comedy by Patterson Greene. Produced by the Theatre Guild, at the Guild Theatre, New York, Jan. 6, 1942.

★ ★+

By BURNS MANTLE

AS ITS contribution to the anti-worry stage fare of war-time, the Theatre Guild offers you a Patterson Greene comedy about the quaint and amusingly tongue-twisted Pennsylvania Dutch folk down Lancaster and Reading way. "Papa Is All" is the title.

Of course Benson of Brooklyn, our easily excited correspondent and kin of President Roosevelt's Dutch forbears, insists there are no such people as Pennsylvania Dutch. They are, says he, Pennsylvania Germans and always have been. How come "Germantown" otherwise?

The real Knickerbocker Dutch never moved west of the Delaware and would not, he intimates, be found dead in Pennsylvania. But that is a controversy Benson of Brooklyn can fight out with the Pennsylvania Dutch themselves.

"Papa Is All" is likely to seem lightly exaggerated in both plot and character away from its home locale, no matter how truthfully written or how well acted.

Seeing Isn't Believing

It isn't easy to untwist the Pennsylvania patois, nor too easy to believe the story the comedy characters tell. Papa may have spent twenty-four hours a day brutally browbeating his completely cowed wife and his two appealing children—

Jake and Emma and Mama may have put up with him for twenty odd years, and never found a way to pull Papa's whiskers until he was willing to cry "Uncle is through, yet!"—

But it is my guess that our audiences are going to be no more than moderately credulous of "Papa Is All."

There are a couple of excellent comedy scenes. One is the family's dutifully suppressed but very real joy when they think Papa has been scattered along a railway right of way by the train that struck his Ford car.

And another when they hear for the first time what really did happen to Papa in lieu of the accident. The first-night Guilders were made very happy by these scenes.

Miss Landis Good

They were truly appreciative, too, of Jessie Royce Landis' fine and artfully modest performance as Mama. She was more successful in keeping Mama in the picture, in fact, than Carl Benton Reid was in making Papa a plausible but fanatical brute.

This, however, was the author's and the director's fault rather than Mr. Reid's, seeing that his scenes were all short and brutal and all in the same key.

Celeste Holm was pleasantly appealing as the girl Emma, and Emmett Rogers a boyishly enthusiastic Jake planning Papa's comeuppence.

Dorothy Sands helped the comedy as a neighborhood gossip, and Royal Beal was helpfully authoritative as a State Trooper.

Emeline Roche has designed both the one-set Pennsylvania farmhouse interior and the costumes, and both are nicely atmospheric. The staging was done originally by Frank Carrington and Agnes Morgan of the Paper-mill Playhouse in New Jersey. It is for the most part briskly amusing.

"Papa Is All"

NEW YORK POST, *January 7, 1942*

"Papa Is All," a Pennsylvania Dutch Comedy, at the Guild

By WILELLA WALDORF

THE Pennsylvania Dutch, by all accounts, are a quaint people who cling happily to their old-fashioned customs and their peculiar dialect while the country around them modernizes itself with ungodly machines and gadgets and gabbles what is loosely referred to as the English language.

Patterson Greene, who lived in Pennsylvania Dutchland long enough to learn something about it, has written a mild but often merry little comedy entitled "Papa Is All," laid in a farmhouse kitchen north of Lancaster, Pa., and produced at the Guild Theatre last night as the Guild's third subscription offering of its current season. From what we have heard and read about the Mennonites and the Amishmen, it would seem a more robust play about them might have been forthcoming, but Mr. Greene's slight piece nevertheless had the first-night Guild audience laughing much of the time.

The tyrannical father who rules his family with a whip, quotes scripture on all occasions, and refuses to permit his children to have any fun is a well-known figure in the theatre, but the Aukamp family is different in that it dwells in a dear old Dutch kitchen and speaks an amusing language all its own.

Papa Is a Terror

Although Papa himself sometimes seems too bad to be true, the other characters in "Papa Is All" are tenderly sketched, and there is material there for an uncommonly effective folk play that never quite manages to develop. When it appears that Papa is indeed all—that is, dead—the family runs amok to the extent of installing a telephone and a doorbell, and a drain in the sink, while the daughter of the house at last is able to go to the movies with her young man without fear that her scandalized parent will be after the fellow with a shotgun.

In his efforts to work up some sort of climax, Mr. Greene has overdrawn some of the goings-on and is none too adroit in handling even his more tepid situations, such as the rather awkward scene in which he has a neighborhood gossip let out the news that Emma has been stepping out when her father thought she was safe in bed by 7 p. m.

As usual, the acting and production are better than the play. Jessie Royce Landis gives a warmly amusing performance as Mama. Always a pleasant actress, she makes a charming figure as the brow-beaten wife who is genuinely delighted when Papa is reported "all." Celeste Holm is glowingly rebellious as the daughter, and Dorothy Sands gets a good deal of merriment out of the role of the talkative neighbor, Mrs. Yoder. Emmett Rogers as the mechanically minded son and Royal Beal as an understanding State policeman are helpful, while Carl Benton Reid does the blustering and whip-wielding as Papa himself, who is nearly, but alas! not quite "all."

Frank Carrington and Agnes Morgan have staged the play with an appreciation of its more charming qualities, and the attractive setting by Emeline Roche is full of what would seem to be highly authentic atmosphere. It is too bad the play itself is so fragile that it sometimes seems in danger of blowing away. As it is, however, it does provide a respectable number of laughs for the Guild's subscription customers, and its dialect at least is something new on Broadway this season.

NEW YORK SUN, *January 7, 1942*

'Papa Is All,' a Cheerful Comedy, Opens at the Guild Theater

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

DOWNTRODEN worms turn on their oppressors in "Papa Is All," which opened very cheerfully at the Guild last evening, and a family ogre is vanquished by an author's witchcraft and a well-used monkey wrench. Nothing essentially novel in the way of drama results, but a good time is had by everybody, including a small group of Pennsylvania Dutch who believe, for all too brief a time, that sonny has finally managed to bump papa off.

Patterson Greene has concocted this agreeably disrespectful fable. It is about Mama and Jake and Emma, who live a little way out of Lancaster, Pa., talk comically in dialect and are harried by a truly ferocious lord and master. He brandishes a whip, spreads the word that his son is feeble-minded, browbeats his wife and becomes "spited" when his daughter goes to the movies with a "surweyor." He regards telephones as ungodly, insists every morning on pancakes for breakfast and is otherwise a pest. He is about to shoot his daughter's young man when fate overtakes him.

What his fate is, and how finally papa is really undone, you will not learn from this reviewer. Pleasant plays such as "Papa Is All" should be allowed to keep their surprises locked in the bosoms of their third acts. I can assure you that you will, in the end, be happy with mama and the children, and beam on them fondly as they talk into their hard-won telephone and listen with shivers of delight to the tinkle of their new doorbell. Mr. Greene has made his people and his play entirely likeable.

Its greatest charm, of course, is in the engagingly preposterous turns of its Pennsylvania Dutch dialect, with verbs popping up in odd places and prepositions living a gay, eventful life of their own. You know by now, no doubt, that the title refers to papa's presumed demise—papa is all over; there isn't any more papa. You will enjoy discovering that "behind" really means "before" and that "ain't" has a mystic meaning of its own, filling a bothersome gap in the English language. Mr. Greene's dialect may be accurate; it is certainly funny and it is used with full appreciation of its humorous possibilities. It, more than anything else—except the acting—makes "Papa Is All" a pleasantly diverting anecdote.

Miss Jessie Royce Landis, playing mama with a lilt and with subtle humor, is an uninterrupted pleasure. Emmett Rogers, using broader strokes but playing with almost equal humor, does an admirable job as the son and Celeste Holm is appealingly attractive as the daughter. Miss Dorothy Sands is pertly comical as a talkative neighbor, always spilling the beans, and Royal Beal playing an inquiring State trooper with proper authority.

Carl Benton Reid's papa, on the other hand, did not seem to me nearly horrendous enough and it was sometimes hard to understand why he frightened everybody so badly. Ogres ought to be ogres, I think, and not obviously good-hearted actors in beards, and "Papa Is All" does need a good ogre. It gets along very nicely, however, just as it is.

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
January 7, 1942

Looks Like It'll Make Down

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

REGIONAL drama seems to be coming thick and fast. The Norwegians from Minnesota who landed on Broadway last Friday passed the Pennsylvania Dutch last night on the way out. The Minnesota folk (*First Crocus*, which closed last night) I found honest but dull; the Pennsylvania ones are livelier but bogus. They would seem, indeed, to have been chosen not for themselves but for their lingo.

They are about as authentically regional as an old-fashioned Vaus-you-dare-Sharley radio vaudeville act. For that matter, there is much that's old-fashioned and more that's vaudeville about *Papa Is All* as a whole. It takes the line of half exploiting melodrama and half kidding it; or you might say that it carries the plot to the point where it goes all to pieces, and then proceeds to throw the pieces around for laughs.

We start off hearing a Mennonite mother, daughter and son tell all about the club-footed father who terrifies and oppresses them. He won't let Mother go near a movie. He won't let daughter have any dates with the boys. He tries to bully son into thinking he's off his chump. Actually we know more about papa before he ever comes on the stage than we do about most characters by the time they have left it. But he finally stumps in, lets loose, takes down the whip, gives sonny a kick, and makes the best heavy seen hereabouts since the hub of the theatre district was in 14th Street.

Then, of a sudden, *Papa Is All* goes gay. Son reports that papa met his Maker, when his car blew up on a railroad track. His death turns into a romp, his widely scattered remains becomes the joke of the season. But it's still only Act II; and with another act to go the audience knows (even if the family doesn't) that papa can't be dead. Sure enough, just as his memory is begetting fresh pleasantries, he comes back and starts raising hell all over again. But in case you're worried, by the final curtain he is once more out of the house.

I'm afraid I found all this very little of a treat. Its trashiness is the least of the matter. But its enterainment value seemed slight. If melodrama and farce are to be married in a play, the minister should turn up long before the middle of the second act; otherwise the tone is off. A household that has been hysterical with fear can't become, just like that, one that is hysterical with laughter. More important, most of the humor seemed to me extremely arch and self-conscious, and the Pennsylvania-Dutch lingo got less amusing by the minute.

Much the most rewarding thing in the play was Jessie Royce Landis's excellent virtuoso performance in the role of the mother. As Papa, Carl Benton Reid did what he could with an impossibly crude part. The others in the cast gave agreeable accounts of themselves.

"The First Crocus"

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *January 3, 1942*

'The First Crocus' Placid Folk Comedy Of the Northwest

"The First Crocus," comedy by Arnold Sundgaard. Produced by T. Edward Hambleton, at the Longacre Theatre, New York, Jan. 2, 1942.

★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

IF ARNOLD SUNDGAARD'S "The First Crocus," revealed at the Longacre Theatre last night, were entered in a playwriting contest devoted to native folk drama it could reasonably win a first prize. Certainly one of the first three.

Entered in the Broadway competition its chances are not too good. It is a placid, undramatic, consistently balanced but never very interesting comedy of the Northwest.

Its chief appeal is in the apparent truthfulness of its character drawing. A family of Jorislunds and their neighbors relate the inconsequential but, to them, vital results of Mother Jorislund's attempt to force her children ahead under the lash of social conditions in the new world.

Greatly to her surprise and something to her dismay, she accomplishes no more than her own and the family's humiliation.

But through the experience she teaches one small son a lesson, stimulates a daughter's determination to leave home to recreate her own life, and gives another son courage to mix matrimony with ambition.

Threaded through the story are character comedy episodes of stronger appeal to those familiar with and sympathetic to Scandinavian family characteristics than they are likely to be to average theatre audiences in this theatre capital.

Mr. Sundgaard may still be counted with the promising lads of the theatre, a classification he won with his first Broadway play—the "Everywhere I Roam"—which Marc Connelly produced three years ago.

His natural inclination to write about the people with whose lives and thought he is most familiar is sound.

His natural feeling for the theatre, his sense of character, his directness and wholesomeness of thought combine as a valuable asset for which any writing man should be grateful.

The production and performance in "The First Crocus" are first class. Martha Hedman, one of the theatre's most sympathetic heroines in the days of "The Boomerang," nearly thirty years ago, has come back to play this ambitious Swedish mother, also with a good deal of sympathy and motherly understanding.

She has in support two or three seasoned character actors, Herbert Nelson, from the stock companies of the West; Hugo Haas, a veteran of the Czechoslovakia stage driven out by the war, and Clarence Nordstrom of native training, who are of solid help to the play.

Edwin Philips and Perry Wilson are better than competent juveniles. Lewis Martin does a self-effacing friend modestly and a bright child named Jocelyn Brando makes much of little as a young girl wonderingly in love.

The settings are by Johannes Larsen, who evidently knows his Minnesota interiors, and the direction, by Halsted Welles, is pleasant.

'THE FIRST CROCUS'

A play in three acts by Arnold Sundgaard; directed by Halsted Welles; settings by Johannes Larsen; presented at the Longacre Theater on January 2, 1942, by T. Edward Hambleton. The cast:

Henrik Jorislund	Edwin Philips
Inga Jorislund	Martha Hedman
Avis Jorislund	Perry Wilson
Milford Jorislund	Eugene Schiel
Lars Hilleboe	Lewis Martin
Anagar Jorislund	Herbert Nelson
Herman Nelson	Huga Haas
Violet Melby	Jocelyn Brando
John Hanson	Jack Parsons
Trygve Knutsen	Clarence Nordstrom
Miss Engebretsen	Joan Croydon
Mrs. Jens Oppedal	Elizabeth Moore
Alfred Oppedal	Harry Maull
Sigvald Pickett Nordahl	Robert Pastene
Paul Johnson	Charles Furcolowe
Richard Johnson	Milton Karol
Borghild Jensen	Connie Maull
Muriel Fevold	Evaline Hunter

NEW YORK TIMES, *January 3, 1942*

THE PLAY IN REVIEW

"The First Crocus"

By BROOKS ATKINSON

NO ONE can accuse Arnold Sundgaard of having written another living-room, divan and bookcase number. In "The First Crocus," which was acted at the Longacre last evening, he is writing about a warm-hearted and hot-tempered Norwegian family in Albion, Minn. The family is bossed by an overbearing mother who is acted by Martha Hedman, who in turn has not appeared on Broadway for almost twenty years.

In case you want to be a critic, you will have to take due notice of the fact that Mr. Sundgaard has not written his play skillfully. It is sprawling and amorphous. It never digs deep inside any of the characters. It also stammers through a poor first act. But this column is very glad to add that it enjoyed making the acquaintance of Mr. Sundgaard's characters and felt very happy while they were puzzling over the myriad problems of middle-class life. As Father Jorislund remarks in despair to his wife after about a quarter of a century of married life: "I thought we got along pretty good for a man and woman." "The First Crocus" is pretty good for a play about a Norwegian family in Minnesota by a playwright who is not yet quite out of his apprenticeship.

* * *

The title refers to a local school custom in honor of the Spring. On a certain day the scholars, as they are invariably dubbed in one-room schoolhouses, rush to find the first crocus in the pasture behind the poorhouse, and whoever finds it is guest of honor at a neighborhood festival in the schoolroom. The youngest of the Jorislund tribe has found it this year; and, rather sheepishly, he sits on the platform during the exercises, his mother being proud that all three of her children have at one time or another won the prize. But this year's exercises are ruined by the sensational discovery that the Jorislund lad did not find the first crocus honestly. He had sneaked into the pasture ahead of time and staked out his crocus with a screw-driver, and he is accordingly very much in disgrace.

Not that Mr. Sundgaard has devoted his whole play to the school-house Spring rites. "The First Crocus" is a sort of modern pastoral. It covers the whole range of life in the country on a scanty budget and the hopes the children have of lifting themselves up by their bootstraps and living with freedom and scope. It is full of homely truths. If the Jorislund family and their neighbors were morose people Mr. Sundgaard's rattling of the skeletons would be pretty dull stuff. But they are individuals of good impulses; they have a real glow of humanity about them, and they are also comically temperamental. Although they are original characters for a Broadway stage, they are part and parcel of American life, and Mr. Sundgaard has had the sense to portray them without theatrical effect.

* * *

Since "The First Crocus" does not fall into any one of the usual categories, it is not easy to stage, and it is not certain at a glance that Halsted Welles of Yale has staged it as resourcefully as he might. And the central character of Mrs. Jorislund is also puzzling. Although her children rebel from her officiousness and her husband has to appease her constantly, she is good-hearted and unselfishly maternal. In Miss Hedman's bustling, portly acting, she emerges as an attractive character with amusing pride in her race and an earthy, wholesome energy. Miss Hedman apparently does not sentimentalize the part. On the other hand, it is difficult to understand the acuteness of the family feeling against her.

Apart from an occasional fling of actress's posturing, Perry Wilson is spirited and thoroughly likeable as the Jorislund daughter. Edwin Philips is neither Norwegian nor bucolic as the older son, but he is vastly enjoyable. Eugene Schiel is excellent as the confused, resentful lad who cheated in the crocus hunt. As the slow-witted father, Herbert Nelson is patient, soft-spoken and ingratiating. In the minor character part of a kindly neighbor, Hugo Haas, once of Prague, is giving a wonderfully full and magnetic performance that is sure in every detail.

Johannes Larsen has designed a frowsy sort of room that looks as though it had been lived in hard. It is a perfect background for Mr. Sundgaard's play. There are a number of things wrong with "The First Crocus" as a play. But the characters are uncommonly interesting and they inhabit Mr. Sundgaard's script as if they belonged there.

"The First Crocus"

NEW YORK SUN, *January 3, 1942*

'The First Crocus,' Charming but Uneventful, Opens at the Longacre

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

YOU will not be apt to meet anywhere people of more simple kindliness or greater charm than those Arnold Sundgaard has gathered together to serve as the characters of "The First Crocus," which opened last evening at the Longacre. Their talk has a quiet pungency and in a gentle fashion they are shrewd—too shrewd and understanding of each other to permit the emotional excitements which make drama to arise. They grow a little unreal only when the author tries to work them up to the tempo of a play.

They are Norwegians, with here and there a Swede, living in a small Minnesota town. A mother and father and three children make the family—a mother who is a little too intrusive in the affairs of the children, a father a little too easy-going, two sons and a daughter who wants to find a man. One of the sons is studying law and the other, the youngest of them all, violates one of the little rules with which the community governs a pleasant custom. The village gives prizes to the child who finds the first crocus of the spring, and young Milford Jorislund, anxious to win to please his mother, uncovers a crocus before the contest starts and illegally marks the spot.

It is characteristic of the play, and of Mr. Sundgaard's present method, that this is about the most exciting thing that happens in "The First Crocus." The family cow calves. Mother Jorislund takes money from the school funds to buy Milford a new suit and Father Jorislund has to sell an old coat to pay the money back. They had told him when he bought the coat that it would last the rest of his life, and he feels that his life is somehow bound up in the coat. But he does not feel this too seriously, for he is a sensible man.

They are all sensible. Mother Jorislund, when the others upbraid her for interfering, talks about leaving, but she is too sensible to leave. Lars Hilleboe, a neighbor, is too sensible not to see Avis, the daughter of the house, when she is under his eyes. Henrik and his funny little girl, Violet, are too sensible to quarrel for long. And all of them are charming, sympathetically seen and believably written. But I am a little afraid that the violent conflicts which make drama, and make plays jump excitingly, do not grow out of such characters. Mr. Sundgaard makes a few transparent efforts to pretend that they do, but to little avail. As a result, "The First Crocus" is only pleasant and uneventful, its action becalmed in charm.

It is delightfully acted. Martha Hedman, returning to the stage after some years of retirement, makes a salty character of Mother Jorislund. Hugo Haas, making his first appearance on the American stage, does a notable, chuckling job as a family friend; Herbert Nelson acts the role of Father Jorislund with tender appreciation of tender writing. Lewis Martin, Edwin Philips and Perry Wilson are also very good, indeed, and wise casting has given animation to the background characters. They all make you wish that character studies of pleasant people added up to plays, but I am afraid they don't.

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, *January 3, 1942*

New Play Shows Life in Midwest

First Crocus Opens at the Longacre

By JOHN MASON BROWN

ARNOLD SUNDGAARD is a playwright possessed as yet of more promise than power. His virtues are not common ones, although his faults are all too common. It was he who some seasons back supplied his fantasy, Everywhere I Roam, with a first act of unforgettable beauty, even if soon thereafter he permitted his play to lose its way. It is he, too, who in a realistic mood once again shows promise in First Crocus, that strange, muddled and uneven little drama which remained so largely a disappointment at the Longacre last evening.

Mr. Sundgaard's new script is a portrait of family life done in regional terms. It is set in a small Minnesota town where the older people, having come from Norway, have trouble with their "j's," and the younger people, being in this sort of play, have trouble with their parents. Using as his central incident the story of how the youngest son cheats to win his school's annual contest to find the first crocus, Mr. Sundgaard probably intends to employ this crocus as a symbol of what is free in man's nature and contrast it with what is cramped, pinched and frustrated in his living.

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But Mr. Sundgaard's meaning remains to the end no clearer than his means. He does not seem to have made up his mind what kind of play he is writing. He carefully prepares the way for a tragedy in which the boy, who has been pushed into cheating out of fear for his mother, will kill himself and then reprieves the boy and proceeds to forget him. He presents as his major figure a bossy mother upon whom we are unquestionably supposed to look with sympathy, despite the fact that she bullies her weak husband, has come near to ruining her daughter's life by meddling in her affairs and has been somewhat nimble-fingered with the school board's funds.

Indeed, Mr. Sundgaard so jumbles up a whole collection of "Yust So" stories in First Crocus that it is hard to know what he is up to. Even so his promise does not desert him. Dull as are stretches in his tenuous and addled little play; silly as is his picture of the brow-beaten father's superstitious fondness for an old overcoat; and unsatisfactory as is his play as a whole, Mr. Sundgaard's talent shows itself in sudden gusts.

• • •

It is when his Norwegians forget the plot and settle down to remembering the old country, or carry on a friendly feud with a warm-hearted Swede, or open windows on a region and a way of life that is very much their own, that Mr. Sundgaard's writing suddenly acquires at intervals a depth and warmth which are both rare and welcome.

He has a nice sense of humor and of character. And he provides such capable players as Hugo Haas, Herbert Nelson and Martha Hedman with parts which they act with affectionate unction and much valid detail. But Mr. Sundgaard needs desperately to control his many genuine gifts if he is ever to write that play which many of us keep hoping that he can and will write.

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, *January 3, 1942*

Country Life

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

BY THE time you have arrived at the end of Arnold Sundgaard's new play, "The First Crocus," you have come to know the Jorislund family pretty intimately. You know about their Norwegian background, their Minnesota farm, their problems, their talk, what they eat and drink and how close they, as well as the audience, have come to murdering Mother. You are on fairly intimate terms with their neighbors and you have had a friendly glimpse into the folk customs of the Scandinavian-Americans of the Northwest. You have even been told, as if perchance you might be interested in it, of the habits of the gopher. The only trouble is that you have likewise discovered that the Jorislunds are a family of bores and are not worth an ambitious author's attention.

• • •

Although he has written one of the dullest plays of the season, Mr. Sundgaard is not a dramatist to be regarded with bitterness. He has a sense of characterization, a gift for atmosphere and a thoughtful understanding of the lives, the lore and the customs of the people he is contemplating. His men and women, tedious as they may be, bear a relation to reality and a sense of kinship with the land from which they stem and have their being. It happens, though, that to transmute dull people into interesting figures in a play requires an additional skill that is still beyond him. You believe in the Jorislunds and their problems completely, but, if your taste in playgoing is anything like mine, you will not be able to raise even an academic interest in their lives and loves.

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About the only thing that "The First Crocus" demonstrates dramatically is that Scandinavian-American families apparently have strange tastes. The sniveling and interfering mother is one of the year's most annoying characters, and when she threatens to walk out on her husband and children they seem mildly upset, rather than filled with the enthusiasm for her departure less loyal men and women would have felt. I think they rather liked her. Anyway she repents slightly in the end, which is just as well, since she is sanely interpreted by Miss Martha Hedman, returning to the stage after all these years for such a role as this. In fact the acting is quite good, particularly by Miss Perry Wilson as the fairly rebellious daughter, Herbert Nelson as the timid husband, Hugo Haas as a friendly Swede, Lewis Martin as a sentimental neighbor and Miss Jocelyn Brando as a shy young woman. But Mr. Sundgaard has been wasting his and our time.

"The First Crocus"

NEW YORK POST, *January 3, 1942*

Arnold Sundgaard's "The First Crocus" Opens at the Longacre

By WILELLA WALDORF

THE Jorislunds, a Norwegian family living in a small town in Minnesota, not far from the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, are dissected with loving care in "The First Crocus," Arnold Sundgaard's play produced last night at the Longacre Theatre. Although Mr. Sundgaard appears to have written it expressly for the stage, it constantly gives the impression of having once been an uncommonly long novel, or even a series of novels published, perhaps, as a five-foot shelf known collectively as The Jorislund Saga.

Long, leisurely tomes transferred to the stage are almost always more notable for atmosphere and characterization than for movement and dramatic force, and Mr. Sundgaard achieves this general effect in "The First Crocus" without harking back to any novel at all. He has written, directly for the theatre, a play that sounds most of the time like a rather awkward dramatization.

The Jorislunds, father, two sons and daughter, are afflicted with a problem wife and mother. She means well, but her habit of interfering in her children's lives, and a tendency to make a martyr of herself whenever possible render her very hard to live with, although her strenuous housewifely activities range all the way from pilfering the petty cash to acting as midwife in the stall of an enceinte heifer.

It is an old Scandinavian custom in the neighborhood to celebrate the finding of the first crocus each spring with a ceremony in the school-house, and prizes for the child bringing in the first bloom. Since his sister and elder brother before him won the competition in earlier years and his mother obviously expects him to uphold the family honor, come what may, young Milford cheats in the crocus hunt and is denounced at the school-house in front of everybody.

Slender as it is, this is the main thread of plot running through Mr. Sundgaard's homely piece of tapestry. His people are clearly drawn, if not particularly arresting figures, but there is little that is stirring about the play in which they find themselves. The author has a warm feeling for the country, an understanding of human relationships, and appreciation of the simpler things of life, but he is unable to provide much interesting drama, and only the mildest sort of comedy, in "The First Crocus."

The direction, like the play, is on the static side, with some good performances helping to round out the leading characters. The thankless role of the meddlesome matriarch is acted with considerable skill by Martha Hedman, returning to Broadway after an absence of many years. Miss Hedman, who was born in Sweden, plays the Norwegian housewife so thoroughly that you are inclined to feel sorry for her, hoping at the same time that one of the children will eventually become sufficiently unstrung to tap her over the head with a blunt instrument.

Edwin Philips, Perry Wilson and young Eugene Schiel do nicely with the offsprings' roles, Herbert Nelson is convincing as the brow-beaten father, and Hugo Haas and Lewis Martin perform capably as a couple of friendly Scandinavians. Jocelyn Brando provides a dash of needed comedy as Violet.

It is doubtful, however, if "The First Crocus" will bloom long on Broadway, especially at this time of year. It seemed a little cold for crocuses in 48th Street last night.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN, *January 3, 1942*

'First Crocus' Opens at the Longacre

Sundgaard's New Play About Life on Minnesota Farm

By JOHN ANDERSON

SINCE Arnold Sundgaard belongs among the younger playwrights of apparent promise his second Broadway production was awaited at the Longacre last night with modest expectancy, but "The First Crocus" turned out to be an imperfect drama, extremely uneven, and as played at a snail's pace it seemed, now and then, nearer sleep than I was. Like its predecessor, "Everywhere I Roam," it contains some excellent passages, heavily streaked with poorer stuff and of interest I fear only to connoisseurs of pretty fragments and dramatic residue.

In his incubator stages a playwright is bound to make mistakes, and by the very nature of his craft, he is obliged to make them in public or they will do him no good. Mr. Sundgaard obviously has qualities worth tending. He is a sensitive observer; he writes without condescension about simple things, and he is able to summarize character shrewdly for his purposes. Though badly over-written, his dialogue at its best has flavor and easy humor.

Rambles Along

But he lacks the larger elements of design and structure. His new play rambles along as if looking for a quiet place to fall to pieces and when it does pull itself together at vague intervals it seems to veer off in a different direction—a combination of defects bound to make for unsteady going.

Here he sketches a Minnesota farm household of Norwegians and the American born youngsters. Papa is a weak, good-natured fellow, who works in a factory while Ma, a sort of unhorsed Valkyrie, runs the farm, the children, and anything else she can get at.

She is so anxious to have her children succeed that the youngest cheats a little in the annual school race to find the first crocus, and everyone is disgraced. She throws out Pa's old overcoat, a symbol of his ignorant superstition, and won't believe the family cow knows her own business in having a calf. She is little Miss Fixit, and though she makes a mess of things, Mr. Sundgaard seemed uncertain whether he was ridiculing her as an archaic meddler or saluting her as the mother of all living. His idea is either so elaborate or so confused that its intent is not clear, and the result is pretty dull, though relieved at times by the folksy quality of the scenes and the freshness of the writing.

Vivid Portrait

Halsted Welles has directed it at a plodding tempo which is not of much help even in the good passages. The movement, especially in the school-house scene has variety, however, and some of the performances are most helpful.

Martha Hedman returns to the stage after a long absence to play the hefty mother, and she makes it as vivid as Mr. Sundgaard's writing permits her to. Herbert Nelson provides an admirable portrait of Pa, and Edwin Philips, Perry Wilson, and Eugent Schiel are all excellent as the realistic members of the younger generation. Hugo Haas contributes an amusing sketch of a Swedish neighbor, and the two settings by Johannes Larsen are expansively atmospheric.

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'First Crocus' Is Pale and Wilted

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

YOU could frequently have heard a pin drop on the stage of the Longacre Friday night, so very quiet was the play that opened there. A folk comedy about a Norwegian-American family in Minnesota, it dwelt at considerable length on their life together, their small hopes and disappointments, their peccadilloes and misunderstandings. Mr. Sundgaard would seem to write out of first-hand knowledge: his world has nothing false or fictitious about it. He shows, too, a feeling for character and some agreeable touches of humor. As a genre study, *The First Crocus* has its points: it is honest and natural and, in the absence of anything ever happening, it can scarcely be called implausible.

Its rather negative virtues are not, however, very much for a play to face the world with. The respect they induce is far greater than the pleasure they provide. The fact that *The First Crocus* has little in the way of plot, of stage conflict, of inherent drama, though a sizeable handicap, would not in itself be a misfortune if the play had any genuine vitality or richness, if a sense of life beat insistently through it. Even though uneventful family chronicles are perhaps better suited to fiction than the theatre, people remain, in the end, more rewarding than plots, and vibrant talk can be a pretty good substitute for action. The real trouble with *The First Crocus* is that its people are no more than pleasantly commonplace, and a good deal of the time just plain boring. The dialogue has no guts, and seldom much flavor. The small crises that wrinkle up the story don't bring out anything fresh or large or valuable in human nature. Worst of all, the tone of the play is monotonous and the pace is snail-like.

In his direction Mr. Welles has made everything even slower; but the cast on the whole is competent. Martha Hedman, returning to Broadway after many years' absence, plays the meddlesome mother convincingly enough; there is a good performance by Hugo Haas, and pleasant acting by Herbert Nelson, Perry Wilson, Lewis Martin and Edwin Philips.